

Tiny Tales from the Mahabharata

A Book of Two Hundred
100-Word Stories

LAURA GIBBS

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About This Book

The Mahabharata tells of the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas, cousins who conceived a deadly hatred for one another. The epic begins with the story of King Shantanu, the Pandavas' great-grandfather, and ends with King Janamejaya, the Pandavas' great-grandson. You will meet Draupadi, the heroine who is married to all five of the Pandava brothers, and you will also meet Krishna, the human avatar of the god Vishnu who sides with the Pandavas in the war. For first-time Mahabharata readers, I've included a list of characters in an appendix to the book, and you'll find additional notes at:

Mahabharata.LauraGibbs.net

The paragraph you just read about the Mahabharata is 100 words long, as is this paragraph, and that's also the length of each episode in this book. The episodes go fast, but you can slow down when you find one you like. Read it again. Let it sink in. You might even write your own versions of your favorite episodes, using your imagination to add more details. Meanwhile, if you get confused by a particular episode, don't get bogged down; just keep reading! You can find more 100-word stories from the Mahabharata, along with a "Tiny Tales" Ramayana, at:

100Words.LauraGibbs.net

THE STORY BEGINS



1. Vyasa Seeks a Scribe

Vyasa had composed a poem and needed a scribe to write it down.

“Will you be my scribe?” he asked Ganesha, the elephant-headed god.

“I will,” said Ganesha, “provided you do not pause in your recitation.”

“I agree,” Vyasa replied, “provided you understand each word’s meaning before you write it down.”

Vyasa recited, and Ganesha wrote.

Sometimes Vyasa said things that were confusing, and Ganesha would pause and think.

Once, when Ganesha’s pen splintered, he broke off one of his own tusks to keep writing.

That was the first version of the Mahabharata.

This Mahabharata will begin with King Shantanu.

2. King Shantanu Gets Married

King Shantanu lived in a great palace in Hastinapura, but he had no queen.

One day he went hunting, and by the river he saw a beautiful woman. He loved the woman at first sight. "Marry me!" he said.

"I agree," the woman replied, "under one condition: you must never question my actions."

Shantanu agreed, and they were soon married.

A year later, their first child was born.

On that very day, the queen took the baby to the river and drowned him there.

King Shantanu was stunned, but said nothing.

He kept his promise to never question her actions.

3. The Story of Mahabhisha

To understand Shantanu's story, listen to the story of Mahabhisha:

King Mahabhisha had earned so much merit that he ascended to Indra's heaven. There he danced with the apsaras to the music of the gandharvas, drinking sura, and the wish-granting tree Kalpataru gave him everything he desired.

One day a breeze blew the goddess Ganga's garment aside. The devas looked away, but Mahabhisha could not resist: he stared directly at her naked breasts.

Indra cursed Mahabhisha to return to earth, and he told Ganga to take human birth and break his heart.

Mahabhisha was reborn as Shantanu, king of Hastinapura.

4. King Shantanu Confronts the Queen

King Shantanu's queen drowned their first child in the river, and their second. One by one, she drowned seven children.

Shantanu said nothing.

When she gave birth to their eighth child, Shantanu shouted, "Stop! I forbid you to kill this child."

"The child will live, but I must leave you now," the queen replied. "I am Ganga, goddess of this river, and I came to earth in order to marry you, bear your children, and drown them as soon as they were born. Our children were the eight Vasus, gods of the eight elements, cursed to be born as humans."

5. The Story of the Vasus

Prabhasa, chief of the Vasus, had coveted the wish-granting cow of the rishi Vashishtha. Together with the other Vasus, Prabhasa stole the cow, but Vashishtha caught them and cursed them. “You will be born on earth as humans.”

The Vasus begged Ganga to be their mother on earth and drown them, making their lives as short as possible.

Ganga agreed. She became the wife of King Shantanu, and she drowned their children as soon as they were born. But when the eighth child was born, Shantanu stopped her.

That eighth child was the incarnation of Prabhasa.

Shantanu named him Devavrata.

6. Devavrata Departs and Returns

“I will take Devavrata with me now,” Ganga told Shantanu, cradling the infant in her arms, “and return him to you later.” She then disappeared into the river.

King Shantanu returned every day to the river, forever hoping that his wife and son would appear.

Then, one day, it happened: Ganga emerged from the river, together with a handsome young man. “Your son has learned the Vedas from the rishi Vashishtha,” she said, “and Parashurama has taught him the arts of war.”

Shantanu embraced his son and proclaimed him to be the crown-prince, his heir.

Ganga then returned to heaven.

7. Shantanu Sees Satyawati

King Shantanu went hunting one day.

Again, he saw a beautiful woman by the river.

Again, he fell in love at first sight.

“Marry me!” he said.

“You must ask my father’s permission,” she replied.

“Who are you?” Shantanu asked. “And who is your father?”

“I am Satyawati,” she said. “My father is a fisherman.”

“Let me marry your daughter!” Shantanu said to the fisherman.

“I agree,” he said, “under one condition: when Satyawati bears you a son, that son must inherit the kingdom.”

But Shantanu could not agree to this condition because he had named Devavrata as his heir.

8. The Story of Satyavati

Who was Satyavati? This is her story:

King Uparichara, resting beneath a tree, thought of his wife and ejaculated. He wrapped the semen in a leaf and gave it to a parrot to take to his wife.

But a falcon attacked the parrot, and the leaf fell into a river.

A fish ate the leaf... a fish who was actually an apsara cursed to live as a fish.

A fisherman caught the fish and found twin babies inside. He took them to King Uparichara, who accepted the boy but gave the girl to the fisherman.

She became his daughter: Satyavati.

9. Devavrata Swears an Oath

Devavrata saw that King Shantanu was troubled, and Shantanu told his son what had happened: to marry Satyawati, he had to promise that her son, not Devavrata, would inherit the kingdom.

Devavrata did not hesitate. "I renounce all claims to the throne!" he said.

"But there is also the problem of your sons," Shantanu added.

Then Devavrata swore a dreadful oath. "I renounce all women, and I will never marry."

Henceforth he was called Bhishma, meaning "dreadful" because of this dreadful oath.

The gods, in admiration and pity, gave Bhishma the boon of choosing the time of his own death.

10. King Shantanu Marries Satyawati

Shantanu then married Satyawati, and they had two sons: Chitrangada and Vichitravirya.

When Shantanu died, Chitrangada became king of Hastinapura.

Chitrangada was a great warrior, but he died in battle before he could marry and have sons of his own.

Bhishma performed the funeral ritual, and then Vichitravirya became king.

Vichitravirya was still very young, so Bhishma and Satyawati ruled the kingdom in his stead.

“He must marry as soon as possible and father sons to carry on the family line,” Satyawati told Bhishma. “Because he is too young to win brides for himself, you must do that for him!”

11. Bhishma Goes to the Swayamvara

Bhishma went to the kingdom of Kashi, where King Kashya was holding a swayamvara for his three daughters: Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. The king had invited many princes to the competition, but not Vichitravirya.

Bhishma, however, was determined that the princesses would marry his half-brother. So, before the competition even began, Bhishma rushed into the assembly, surprising everyone. He grabbed the three princesses and raced away in his chariot, fighting off the angry princes who pursued him.

Bhishma's rivals were disappointed, and none more so than Prince Shalva, who was secretly betrothed to the eldest of the three princesses, Amba.

12. Amba Pleads with Bhishma

Bhishma returned to Hastinapura with three brides for Vichitravirya, but Amba confessed that she was secretly betrothed to King Shalva.

“Let me go to Shalva,” she begged.

Bhishma agreed, but when Amba went to Shalva, he rejected her. “I cannot marry you,” he said. “You belong to Bhishma.”

Then, when Amba returned to Hastinapura, Bhishma also rejected her. “I cannot let Vichitravirya marry you now,” he said.

“Then you must marry me!” insisted Amba.

“I cannot,” Bhishma replied.

Without home or husband, Amba blamed Bhishma for her fate. “Someday, somewhere, I will be the cause of Bhishma’s death,” she vowed.

13. Amba Goes to Parashurama

Amba then sought an avenger who would fight Bhishma, but the kshatriya-warriors were all afraid of him, and no one would help her.

Then Amba went to Parashurama, the brahmin-warrior who had been Bhishma's teacher.

"What Bhishma did to you was wrong," Parashurama said to Amba. "I agree to fight him for you."

Parashurama challenged Bhishma, and Bhishma reluctantly agreed to fight his guru. They fought for many days and, to Parashurama's surprise, he could not defeat his former pupil.

"No one can kill Bhishma unless he wishes to die," Parashurama told Amba. "There is no way to defeat him."

14. Amba Prays to the Gods

When Parashurama failed to defeat Bhishma, Amba despaired. She prayed to the gods to avenge her humiliation. She stood on one foot on top of a high mountain, through hot and cold, in sun and snow, not eating and not drinking until the gods answered her.

Years passed.

Finally Shiva appeared. “You will bring about Bhishma’s death, but not in this lifetime,” he said. “You must wait for your next lifetime.”

But Amba didn’t wait. She built a funeral pyre and threw herself into the flames.

She was reborn as Shikhandini, the daughter, and later the son, of King Drupada.

15. How the Sons of Satyavati Died

Chitrangada died unmarried. A gandharva had challenged him, shouting, "My name is Chitrangada, and I forbid you to use my name!" "No!" the king retorted; "I am Chitrangada forever!" Then they fought fiercely for days, weeks, months, years. After three years, the gandharva won. The king who would not surrender his name paid with his life.

Vichitravirya died married, but without sons. He was still a boy when he became king, and Bhishma ruled as his regent. "You must not enter my palace," Bhishma told him, "not ever!" But Vichitravirya disobeyed him, and Bhishma's pet elephant crushed him to death.

16. Vichitravirya Leaves Two Widows

When Vichitravirya died, he left behind two widows, the princesses of Kashi: Ambika and Ambalika. Both were childless.

“Who will be king of Hastinapura now?” Satyawati wailed. In desperation, she turned to Bhishma for help. “It is lawful for a dead man’s brother to continue the family line,” she told him. “You are his half-brother! You must marry the princesses.”

“You of all people know I cannot do that,” Bhishma replied. “Your father compelled me to renounce all offspring.”

Satyavati then said something that took Bhishma completely by surprise. “Then I must summon my son. He is our only hope.”

17. Another Story of Satyavati

Satyavati, who had been born from a fish, became a beautiful young woman, but she smelled like a fish. People called her Matsyagandha, “Fish-Smell,” and no man would marry her.

Satyavati worked ferrying people across the river, and one day a rishi named Parashara fell in love with her. “Become my lover,” he said, “and I will use my powers to remove your fish-smell, replacing it with a scent no man can resist. I will also restore your virginity afterwards.”

Satyavati agreed, and the rishi kept his promise.

Their son was Vyasa.

Yes, the same Vyasa who composed the Mahabharata.

18. Satyavati Summons Vyasa

To continue the family line, Satyavati summoned Vyasa, who was living as a forest rishi.

“Mother, I will do what you want,” he said, “but give me time to make myself presentable.”

“No,” she said, “come now! The widows await you.”

Vyasa went to Ambika. Terrified by his appearance, she closed her eyes.

Ambalika was also terrified, and the blood drained from her face.

Vyasa told Satyavati, “Ambika’s son will be blind, and Ambalika’s son will be pale.”

“Go to Ambalika again,” Satyavati said.

But Ambalika had her maid take her place. She greeted Vyasa happily and showed no fear.

19. Three Sons are Born

All that Vyasa said came true.

Ambika's son was born blind. They named him Dhritarashtra, which means "Kingdom-Holder."

Ambalika's son was born pale. They named him Pandu, which means "Pale."

Ambalika's maid had a beautiful boy, and they named him Vidura, which means "Wise," and he grew up worthy of the name. But because he was the son of a maid, Vidura was not a royal prince like his brothers, and he could never be king.

Dhritarashtra was the eldest, but because he was blind, he was not allowed to become king.

Thus Pandu the Pale became king of Hastinapura.

20. The Story of Mandavya

To understand Vidura's story, listen to Mandavya's story:

While the rishi Mandavya meditated, thieves hid in his ashram. The king's guards arrested Mandavya with the thieves. "I'm innocent!" Mandavya protested, but the king pierced him with a lance.

Mandavya complained to Yama, god of dharma.

"Actions have consequences," said Yama. "That's karma. As a boy, you played with insects, piercing them with sticks. You, the impaler, have been impaled."

"That is not justice!" replied Mandavya. "I curse you to suffer unjustly in another life."

Yama was born as Vidura, having the qualities of a king but not allowed to rule.

PANDAVAS AND KAURAVAS



21. The Brothers Get Married

King Pandu married Kunti, daughter of Shurasena, ruler of the Yadavas. But Kunti bore no children, so after a while Pandu took a second wife, Madri, daughter of King Shalya of Madra. Like Kunti before her, Madri also did not bear any children, and Pandu had no son to succeed him.

Prince Dhritarashtra, meanwhile, married a princess named Gandhari, daughter of King Subala of Gandhara. When she learned that her husband was blind, Gandhari blindfolded herself, vowing that she would share his blindness.

“Let us have children soon!” Dhritarashtra told her, hoping that their son would rule Hastinapura after Pandu.

22. Pandu Goes Hunting

While hunting, Pandu shot a stag in the act of love. The stag was in fact a rishi named Kindama, and the doe was his wife. They had transformed into deer to make love in the forest.

As he was dying, Kindama cursed Pandu. “You will die, just as I am dying, if you ever touch a woman again.”

Pandu realized he would never be able to have a son, so he renounced the world and went to live in the wilderness. His devoted wives, Kunti and Madri, went into the wilderness with him.

Thus Dhritarashtra became king after all.

23. The Story of Kunti's Mantra

But Kunti had a secret.

Years ago, the rishi Durvasa had visited her parents. Durvasa was notoriously bad-tempered, but Kunti's gracious hospitality pleased him, and he rewarded her with a mantra. "It summons any god," he explained, "and that god will give you a child."

Wondering if what Durvasa said was true, Kunti used the mantra to summon Surya, the sun-god.

Surya appeared!

"Forgive me," Kunti said. "I didn't mean it."

"The mantra cannot be undone," Surya replied.

Kunti became pregnant, and when the baby was born, she put him in a basket and set him adrift in a river.

24. Kunti and Madri Have Sons

Kunti told Pandu about her mantra, and Pandu was delighted. “Summon Yama, god of dharma,” he exclaimed, “and our son will be righteous.”

Kunti summoned Yama, and she had a son. They named him Yudhishtira.

“Now summon Vayu, god of wind, so our son will be strong.” Kunti had another son, and they named him Bhima.

“We need a warrior son,” said Pandu. “Summon Indra, king of the gods.”

Kunti had a third son, and they named him Arjuna.

Kunti shared her mantra with Madri, and she summoned the twin Ashwin gods, who gave her twin sons, Nakula and Sahadeva.

25. Dhritarashtra Has a Son

King Dhritarashtra rejoiced when his wife Gandhari told him she was pregnant, but he despaired a year later when she still had not given birth. Another year went by, and still Gandhari had not given birth, although her belly was big.

While he waited for his wife's delivery, Dhritarashtra took his wife's maid, Sughada, into his bed. She gave birth to a son: Yuyutsu.

Because Yuyutsu's mother was a member of the servant class and not a kshatriya-warrior, Yuyutsu could not inherit the throne, much like his low-born uncle Vidura. Also like Vidura, Yuyutsu was a wise and righteous man.

26. Gandhari Has Sons

Pandu now had five sons by his two wives, but Dhritarashtra's wife Gandhari still had no children, although she had been pregnant for years. In frustration, she struck her belly, and a ball of flesh emerged.

Gandhari despaired, but Vyasa assured her, "You will have many children." He divided the flesh into a hundred pieces, putting them into pots.

"These will be one hundred sons," Vyasa said.

"I'd like a daughter too," said Gandhari.

Vyasa brought another pot, and put a piece of flesh into that pot also.

The children grew in the pots: one hundred sons and one daughter.

27. Pandu Cannot Resist

One day Pandu was seized with desire for his wife Madri.
“You are so beautiful. Come, let me embrace you!”

“No!” shrieked Madri.

When Pandu touched her, he died, just as the curse foretold.

Stricken with grief and guilt, Madri leaped onto Pandu’s funeral pyre.

Kunti then raised her sons and the sons of Madri together; they were the Pandavas, sons of Pandu.

Kunti brought the boys to Hastinapura.

King Dhritarashtra acknowledged his nephews, and the sons of Pandu grew up together with Dhritarashtra’s sons, who were known as the Kauravas, descendants of Kuru, the ancient founder of their dynasty.

28. A Story about Pandu

Before his death, Pandu revealed a secret to his sons. “Years of meditation have imbued my flesh with great wisdom. After I die, eat my flesh and you will receive this wisdom.”

But the priests cremated Pandu’s body before his sons could do as he had ordered.

Sahadeva, however, saw ants carrying away tiny bits of Pandu’s body, which he took and put in his mouth. Instantly, he knew everything, past and future.

Then a stranger, who was Krishna in disguise, told him, “Never reveal your knowledge. Answer every question with a question.”

Sahadeva obeyed, keeping his knowledge to himself.

29. Duryodhana Plots against Bhima

Duryodhana was the eldest son of Dhritarashtra, and he conceived a deep hatred for the Pandavas, his cousins. In particular, he hated Bhima, the strongest among the Pandavas, who liked to play tricks on him.

Duryodhana decided to kill his cousin, so he put poison in Bhima's food and then, when Bhima was unconscious, he threw Bhima into the river.

Bhima sank deep into the waters, and when the nagas of the river bit him, their poison counteracted Duryodhana's poison. Bhima did not die! Amazed, the nagas took Bhima into the depths of the river to see their king, Vasuki.

30. Bhima Meets the Naga King

“You look familiar,” Vasuki said. “Who are you?”

“I am Bhima, son of Pandu, King of Hastinapura, and of Kunti, daughter of Shurasena, ruler of the Yadavas.”

“Of course!” Vasuki exclaimed. “Shurasena had a naga wife. That makes us cousins! I know about Yadu also. He was once swimming in the ocean when the naga king of that time brought Yadu to his undersea palace and gave him five naga princesses to be his wives.”

Then Vasuki gave Bhima a potion endowing him with the strength of a thousand elephants, and Bhima emerged from the river more powerful than before.

31. Drona Comes to Hastinapura

The brahmin-warrior Drona came to Hastinapura seeking employment. As he approached the palace, he saw the young princes, both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, trying to retrieve a ball they had lost in a well.

“Help us, sir!” said one of the boys; that boy was Arjuna.

Drona plucked a blade of grass and threw it like a dart. It pierced the ball, and then he threw another blade of grass, and another, forming a chain so he could pull the ball out.

The boys, amazed by his abilities, ran to tell Bhishma, who engaged Drona to be their guru.

32. Drona Arranges an Archery Contest

Drona trained the Pandavas and the Kauravas in warfare, and Arjuna was his best student.

One day, Drona staged an archery contest. He mounted a stuffed bird high on a pole and summoned the princes. "What do you see?" Drona asked.

Yudhishtira went first. "I see you, and a pole, and..."

"Stop!" Drona shouted. "Next!"

"I see a pole, and a bird..."

None of the princes satisfied Drona.

Then Arjuna said, "I see an eye."

"Do you see the pole?"

"No."

"The bird?"

"No, only an eye."

"Shoot!" said Drona, and Arjuna hit the target.

Thus Arjuna won the contest.

33. A Crocodile Attacks Drona

One day when Drona was bathing in the river, a crocodile seized him.

Drona yelled for help, and Arjuna came running. When he saw his guru in the crocodile's jaws, Arjuna shot five arrows that sliced through the crocodile and killed it.

Drona was free!

In gratitude, Drona taught Arjuna the mantra for a secret weapon. "Use this weapon with care," Drona warned him. "If you launch it against an enemy who is inferior to you, it will destroy the universe. Use it only on an overwhelming enemy, and you will triumph, no matter how powerful your opponent might be."

34. Ekalavya Seeks a Guru

Ekalavya, a boy who lived in the forest, asked Drona to be his guru, but Drona refused.

Ekalavya then made a statue of Drona and trained himself under the gaze of this statue.

He became a remarkable archer.

One day Arjuna's hunting dog was barking. To silence the dog, Ekalavya shot arrows into the dog's mouth in a way that did not harm the dog but kept it from closing its mouth.

When he saw this, Arjuna was dismayed. "Look at this, Drona!" he cried. "You promised I would be the greatest archer, but even I cannot shoot like this."

35. Drona Demands Payment

“Who did this?” Drona shouted, pointing to the arrows in the dog’s mouth.

Ekalavya stepped forward. “I did!”

Drona recognized the forest-boy. “Who trained you?”

“You did,” Ekalavya replied, proudly showing Drona the statue he had made, certain Drona would now accept him as his student.

But instead, Drona said, “Since I was your guru, you must now pay the guru-fee.”

“Anything!” exclaimed Ekalavya.

“Give me the thumb of your right hand,” said Drona.

Ekalavya did not hesitate; he cut off his thumb and presented it to Drona.

Drona smiled; the boy would never again rival Arjuna as an archer.

36. The Princes Display Their Prowess

When the princes completed their training, Drona organized a tournament, and the public thronged the stadium.

Yudhishtira, Duryodhana, Bhima, all the princes performed brilliantly, but Arjuna was the best.

Then a stranger entered the stadium. "I challenge you, Arjuna!" he said. "Fight me!"

"But who are you?" asked Drona.

"I am Karna!" replied the stranger.

"I don't know you," Drona said. "Who is your father?"

The stranger hesitated. "My father is a charioteer."

Drona sneered at the stranger.

But Queen Kunti, sitting in the audience, fainted. She had guessed Karna's identity: he was her first-born son, now a grown man.

37. Karna Becomes King of Anga

Karna turned to leave, but Duryodhana badly wanted to humiliate Arjuna.

“Stop!” he shouted. “I make Karna king of Anga, and the king of Anga will fight Arjuna.”

“I am your loyal friend forever,” said Karna. Then he turned to face Arjuna. “Now we will fight!”

Arjuna was indignant. “I won’t fight a charioteer’s son!”

“He is a king!” Duryodhana shouted, turning to his father for support, although Dhritarashtra only shook his head in confusion.

The crowd murmured, not sure what to think.

Then the sun set.

The tournament was over, but Duryodhana had acquired a new ally in Karna.

38. The Story of Karna and the Two Curses

A charioteer had found baby Karna in the river and adopted him, but Karna's life was cursed.

First, practicing archery, Karna accidentally killed a brahmin's cow. "You will die like my cow," swore the brahmin, "struck down by an inescapable arrow."

Another time, Karna saw a girl crying because she had spilled a pot of milk. Feeling sorry for her, Karna squeezed the milk back out of the earth. This caused the earth great pain, and the earth goddess, Bhudevi, cursed Karna. "When you are in danger," she said, "I will not help you; instead, I will help your opponent."

39. Karna Becomes Parashurama's Disciple

Karna asked the brahmin-warrior Parashurama to teach him the Brahmastra weapon.

"I suspect you're a kshatriya," said Parashurama.

"No!" Karna lied. "I'm no kshatriya!"

So Karna became Parashurama's disciple.

One day Parashurama fell asleep, his head resting on Karna's lap. An enormous centipede bit Karna's thigh and sucked his blood. Karna said nothing, not wanting to wake his guru.

When Parashurama awoke and found himself covered with blood, he shouted, "Only a kshatriya would bear such pain in silence. For your deceit, I curse you: when you want to use the Brahmastra, the sacred mantra will slip from your mind."

40. The Story of Drona and Drupada

When Drona had trained the Pandavas and Kauravas, he demanded the guru-fee: he wanted revenge on King Drupada.

This is why:

Young Drupada had studied with Bharadwaja, Drona's father. As boys, Drupada and Drona were best friends.

Time passed. Drupada became king, while Drona was only a poor brahmin, so poor he didn't even have milk to give to his little boy, Ashwatthama.

Out of love for his son, Drona went to ask his friend Drupada for help.

"Friend?" King Drupada scoffed. "Friends must be equals, but you are not my equal in any way."

Drona vowed revenge that day.

41. Drona Gets Revenge

“For the guru-fee,” Drona said to his pupils, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, “you will attack King Drupada. Seize him, and bring him here.”

The princes succeeded, and they brought Drupada in chains to Drona.

“I could kill you right now, Drupada,” said Drona, “but I will not kill you. I want us to be friends.” Drona then smiled a cold smile. “Friends must be equals. So I will take half of your kingdom.”

Drupada stared at him in angry silence.

“That makes us equals,” Drona continued, “and now we can be friends.”

Drupada agreed, but he never forgave Drona.

42. Drupada Prays for Children

Enraged at Drona and his patrons in Hastinapura, Drupada prayed to Shiva. “Give me a son to kill Bhishma, then a son to kill Drona, and a daughter to divide and destroy Hastinapura.”

The god Shiva appeared and said, “Your prayers are granted.”

Drupada’s wife had a daughter, Shikhandini. Trusting this would be the son who would kill Bhishma, Drupada raised Shikhandini as a boy: Shikhandin.

Drupada then conducted a ritual and from the sacred fire a young man emerged, wearing supernatural armor. Drupada named him Dhrishtadyumna.

Then, a young woman emerged from the fire, and Drupada named her Draupadi.

43. Shikhandin Gets Married

The girl born to King Drupada, Shikhandini, was Amba. As the gods promised, she was reborn as a warrior who would defeat Bhishma, but because she had cut short her life as a woman, she still had years of a woman's life left to live.

Drupada, however, was confident, and he raised Shikhandini as a boy. He even arranged for Shikhandin to marry the daughter of King Hiranyavarna, but when the bride discovered her husband-to-be was a woman, she ran home to her father, who declared war on King Drupada.

Shikhandin resolved to go into the forest and commit suicide.

44. Shikhandin Meets a Helpful Yaksha

Shikhandin built a funeral pyre and was prepared to leap into the flames when a yaksha shouted, “Wait! What are you doing, young warrior? Why end your life?”

Shikhandin explained.

The yaksha, whose name was Sthuna, offered to trade genders. “I will give you my manhood,” said the yaksha, “and instead of Sthuna, I will become Sthuni. You can go prove to your father that you are his son and to your wife that you are her husband, and then come return my manhood to me.”

Shikhandin was delighted. “I will come back and return your manhood tomorrow,” he promised.

45. Kubera Confronts Sthuni

Shikhandin went back home to prove his manhood, while Sthuni awaited his return.

Later that day, however, Kubera, King of the Yakshas, paid a visit and noticed Sthuni had changed gender. “When did you become a woman?” he asked, and Sthuni explained.

This made Kubera angry. “Gender is not a toy to play with. You will remain a woman, and Shikhandin will remain a man. Only when Shikhandin dies will his manhood return to you.”

Thus the gods fulfilled their promise to Amba and Drupada: Shikhandin, a warrior born as a woman, would be able to defeat Bhishma in battle.

THE CONFLICT INTENSIFIES



46. Kunti's Elephant Ritual

Kunti decided to perform an elephant ritual to bring blessings upon her sons, so she had the potters of Hastinapura make elephants of clay for her to use.

Gandhari was jealous and wanted to perform an even grander ritual for her sons, so she had the goldsmiths make golden elephants.

Kunti was dismayed, but Arjuna said, "Don't worry! I'll ask my divine father Indra to send his heavenly elephant Airavata." Arjuna then lifted his bow, shooting arrows into the sky to create a bridge by which Airavata descended.

Kunti thus conducted the most grand elephant ritual ever seen in Hastinapura.

47. Queen Satyawati Departs

The aged Queen Satyawati was dismayed to see such strife among her great-grandsons, the sons of Pandu and the sons of Dhritarashtra.

“All my life I worked for the success of this family,” she said, “but now I see the sons of the sons of my son quarreling with each other like dogs fighting over scraps in the street. I cannot bear it. I am going to retire into the forest.”

The widows of Vichitravirya, Ambika and Ambalika, departed together with her. No one ever saw them again.

Kunti and Gandhari were then the elders among the ladies of Hastinapura.

48. The Kauravas and Pandavas Trade Insults

The young Kauravas often insulted their Pandava cousins. “Pathetic Pandu had no sons!” they would shout. “Your mothers were whores!”

One day, though, Bhima shouted back, “Your mother’s a widow!”

The Kauravas ran to Bhishma to ask what this meant, and Bhishma launched an investigation. He learned that the astrologers of Gandhara predicted Gandhari’s first husband would die, while her second husband would live a long life. Gandhari’s father, King Subala, thus decided to cheat fate: he married Gandhari to a goat which he then sacrificed.

Dhritarashtra was her second husband.

Bhishma was furious when he learned of this deceit.

49. Bhishma Imprisons Subala

Bhishma vowed to kill Subala and his family. He locked them in prison, giving them only a handful of rice each day.

Subala's sons fought over the rice, but Subala ordered them to give it all to Shakuni. "He is the most clever," said Subala. "He must live to avenge us." Subala then broke Shakuni's ankle. "When you limp," he said, "remember us."

Later, as he was dying, Subala said, "Make my knucklebones into dice. Those dice will do your bidding."

Shakuni alone survived. He then lived in Hastinapura with Gandhari, but he nursed hatred for Bhishma in his heart.

50. King Dhritarashtra Sends the Pandavas Away

King Dhritarashtra assigned his nephew Yudhishtira important public duties in Hastinapura, but he later regretted this decision. Yudhishtira and his brothers became wildly popular, and Dhritarashtra was worried that the Pandava brothers had eclipsed his own son Duryodhana in the public's esteem.

As a result, the king decided to send the Pandavas away. "Take a long holiday!" he said to Yudhishtira. "Go with your mother and brothers to Varanavata."

Yudhishtira was surprised, but he did as his uncle commanded.

Meanwhile, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, and Shakuni hatched an evil plot, hoping to put an end to the Pandavas once and for all.

51. Duryodhana Plots against the Pandavas

King Dhritarashtra ordered a beautiful palace built for the Pandavas in Varanavata, and he put his son Duryodhana in charge.

Duryodhana, meanwhile, turned the palace into a deadly trap, arranging for the building materials to be soaked in oil and resin so he could burn the Pandavas alive in their home.

But Vidura, Dhritarashtra's low-born brother, warned his nephews to beware. "The wise jackal's den has more than one exit," he told Yudhishtira.

"I understand," said Yudhishtira, smiling.

The Pandavas pretended to be delighted with their new palace, but they secretly built a tunnel that would provide a safe escape.

52. The House in Varanavata Burns

The royal administrator in Varanavata, Purochana, was Duryodhana's agent. The Pandavas knew he planned to kill them in a fire.

"We'll beat him to it," said Yudhishtira, and he ordered Bhima to set the palace on fire.

The Pandavas escaped through their tunnel, while Purochana died in the flames.

A mother and her five sons also died in the fire. They had come to the palace seeking food and drink, and there they fell asleep, intoxicated.

The next day, when their charred remains were discovered, Duryodhana was delighted, thinking the Pandavas and their mother Kunti had died in the fire.

53. The Pandavas Escape

When the Pandavas and Kunti emerged at the other end of the tunnel, they met a boatman who was waiting for them as Vidura had arranged, and they gave the watchword: “The wise jackal’s den has more than one exit.”

This boatman took them across the river, and they then fled deep into the forest. Their plan was to hide in the forest, disguised as brahmins, keeping as far from Duryodhana and his spies as they could.

Meanwhile, back in Hastinapura, King Dhritarashtra mourned his nephews in public, but privately he rejoiced with his son Duryodhana.

Vidura, meanwhile, kept silent.

54. Bhima Fights a Rakshasa

As they wandered the forest, Bhima would stand watch over his mother and brothers while they slept.

One night, a rakshasa named Hidimba approached them. "I smell humans!" he said to his sister, Hidimbi. "Lure that big one in my direction. I'll kill him, and we will enjoy a feast!!"

But when Hidimbi saw Bhima, she fell in love. While Bhima and her brother fought, she used supernatural powers to protect Bhima, and he killed her brother.

Bhima then married Hidimbi, and she bore their son: Ghatotkacha.

"If you ever need me," Ghatotkacha told Bhima, "call, and I will come."

55. Bhima Fights Baka

In their wanderings, the Pandavas met their grandfather Vyasa. “Go to the village of Ekachakra,” he advised them.

The villagers there told the Pandavas that a deadly rakshasa named Baka demanded a cartload of food daily. He ate the food, and the driver too!

Bhima agreed to drive the cart, being eager to eat the food himself.

As Bhima sat on the cart eating, Baka attacked. “That’s my food!” he shrieked.

Bhima just laughed.

They wrestled, and Bhima finally killed Baka.

The villagers wanted to honor their saviors, but the Pandavas decided to move on before their identity was discovered.

56. The Pandavas Meet a Gandharva

One day in the forest, a gandharva named Angaraparna attacked the Pandavas, but Arjuna incinerated Angaraparna's chariot with a fire-arrow and captured him.

Angaraparna's wife begged for mercy, and the Pandavas freed him. Angaraparna then rewarded the Pandavas with great hospitality, telling them many stories, and also giving them advice. "Find a priest, get a wife, and make yourselves the kings you were born to be."

So the Pandavas found a priest, and the priest told them to seek a wife at the swayamvara of King Drupada.

Because they were still hiding from the Kauravas, they went disguised as brahmins.

DRAUPADI AND THE PANDAVAS



57. Drupada Holds a Swayamvara

Kings and princes thronged the stadium, eager to compete for Draupadi, King Drupada's fire-born daughter. Drupada had put a revolving fish-shaped target high on a pole, and the archer had to shoot by looking at the target reflected in a pan of oil below.

Many princes tried and failed.

Then it was Karna's turn. He nocked an arrow confidently, but before he could shoot, Draupadi exclaimed, "I recognize this so-called king! He's just a charioteer. Send him away!"

"He is King of Anga," Duryodhana protested. "Let him compete!"

"No, my friend," Karna said to Duryodhana. "I do not want her."

58. Krishna Recognizes the Pandavas

The Pandavas attended Draupadi's swayamvara disguised as brahmins.

One of the princes in the audience was Krishna, who recognized the Pandavas despite their disguises. "Look, Balarama," Krishna said to his brother, pointing at the brahmins. "Those are the Pandavas!"

"Then they did not die in the fire after all!" Balarama exclaimed.

"Now we will see something momentous," Krishna murmured. "Arjuna will surely be able to pass Drupada's test. And then things will get... interesting. Very interesting."

Just as Krishna foretold, Arjuna stood up and approached the target, while the crowd murmured in surprise that a brahmin had entered the competition.

59. Arjuna Competes in the Swayamvara

When Arjuna approached the target, the kings and princes shouted, “Brahmins aren’t allowed!”

But Draupadi was intrigued and did not object, nor did King Drupada.

Arjuna nodded his thanks to Drupada and smiled at Draupadi. He then seized his bow, taking aim as he looked at the target reflected in the oil.

Arjuna shot not just one arrow, but five, hitting the target every time.

Draupadi draped the victor’s garland on the mysterious brahmin.

The kings and princes grew even more angry, but Bhima fought them off, and the five Pandavas fled with Draupadi, taking her to their humble home.

60. The Pandavas Must Share the Alms

Each day, the Pandavas would bring home the alms they had begged and give them to their mother, Kunti. So, after Arjuna won the wedding contest for Draupadi, Bhima decided to play a little joke. "Mother, come see what alms we have brought home today!" he shouted to her inside the house.

"Of course you must share the alms equally!" Kunti shouted back.

Then she came outside and saw Draupadi, who gave Kunti a shy and confused smile.

"I cannot take back my words, dear," she said to her new daughter-in-law. "All five of my sons will be your husbands."

61. King Drupada Receives the Pandavas

“We must go explain this to my father,” said Draupadi, and she then led the five Pandavas back to the palace.

King Drupada had already guessed who these five brahmins must be. “If you are who I think you are,” he said to Yudhishtira, smiling, “I know you cannot lie to me. Tell me truthfully: who are you?”

“I am Yudhishtira, son of Pandu, once a prince of Hastinapura, and these are my brothers: Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The lovely Draupadi will be our wife.”

King Drupada stared at Yudhishtira in confusion.

“We will all marry Draupadi,” Yudhishtira repeated.

62. The Story of Nalayani

“Impossible!” Drupada shouted. “A woman cannot have five husbands.”

Vyasa then appeared, as if he knew he was needed. “I can explain,” he said, smiling at his grandsons. “This is Draupadi’s fate. In a past life, she was Nalayani, married to the rishi Moudgalya. Because of her devotion, Moudgalya offered to grant her a boon. She asked him to make love to her in five different forms, and he did. Later, when Moudgalya renounced the world, Nalayani despaired. ‘I want my husband, husband, husband, husband, husband,’ she sighed, thinking of Moudgalya’s five forms. The gods are granting her wish now.”

63. Shiva Fulfills a Woman's Prayer

Here is another story about Draupadi's past life:

She was a woman without a husband, so she prayed to Shiva. "Give me a husband who always tells the truth," she said. "Give me a husband who is powerful and strong. A skilled and fearless husband. A handsome husband. A wise husband."

Shiva then appeared. "I will grant your prayer," he said, "but you will have five husbands, not one. There is no way that one husband alone could have all the qualities that you desire. God has all those qualities, but you will not find them in one man alone."

64. Draupadi Marries the Pandavas

Reassured by Vyasa, Drupada gave his approval. Draupadi married Yudhishtira first. Next she married Bhima, and then Arjuna, who had actually won her at the swayamvara. Finally, she also married Nakula and Sahadeva.

Draupadi agreed that she would spend a year with each of the Pandavas in turn. If any brother violated this arrangement, in thought or in deed, he would go into exile, completing a pilgrimage to redeem himself.

Meanwhile, news of these events reached King Dhritarashtra and his son Duryodhana in Hastinapura. The Pandavas were not dead after all! Even worse: they were now Drupada's allies by marriage.

65. King Dhritarashtra Deliberates

King Dhritarashtra was concerned about this new alliance of the Pandavas with King Drupada.

“Drupada has never forgiven Drona for making him divide his kingdom,” Dhritarashtra said, “and now my nephews have become his sons-in-law.”

“This is indeed a dangerous alliance,” Drona observed. “Drupada’s own son Dhrishtadyumna is a formidable warrior.”

But Bhishma urged Dhritarashtra to make peace with his nephews. “You never should have sent them away to Varanavata. Let Vidura go congratulate them on their marriage and invite them back home to Hastinapura.”

“Yes,” King Dhritarashtra decided at last. “It is time for the Pandavas to come home.”

66. The Pandavas Go to Khandavaprastha

Cautiously, the Pandavas accepted their uncle's invitation to leave the safety of Drupada's kingdom and return to Hastinapura.

"I have decided to divide the kingdom between my own sons and you, who are my brother's sons," King Dhritarashtra told them. "Your half will be the land called Khandavaprastha. That will be your kingdom."

Khandavaprastha, however, was a wilderness.

"Our uncle is sending us into this barren desert to die!" shouted Bhima.

"Do not worry," said Yudhishtira confidently. "We will make it a great kingdom."

The Pandavas cleared the land and built a beautiful capital city. They called their kingdom Indraprastha.

67. Khandava Forest Burns

A brahmin approached Arjuna and Krishna in Khandava Forest. “Feed me!” he said. Then he revealed himself as Agni, the fire-god. “Drive Indra’s rain away so I can eat the fat of the animals.”

In exchange, Agni offered weapons: the Gandiva bow for Arjuna, and the Sudarshana-Chakra discus for Krishna.

As the fire raged, Arjuna and Krishna kept Indra’s rain away, shooting their arrows into the sky. Agni thus consumed the forest’s trees and animals. Only a few birds escaped, plus the naga Ashwasena, and also Mayasura, architect of the asuras, who built a splendid palace for the Pandavas.

68. The Story of Sunda and Upasunda

The rishi Narada visited Yudhishtira's court at Indraprastha, and he told the Pandavas this story as a warning:

The twin asura brothers, Sunda and Upasunda, tormented the world. No creature, mortal or immortal, could defeat them.

The god Brahma then created a perfectly beautiful apsara: Tilottama.

Dressed in a sari of red silk, she danced before the brothers. They were captivated.

"She's mine!" shouted Sunda.

"No!" shouted Upasunda. "She's mine! I saw her first!"

"No!" shouted Sunda. "I saw her first!"

Because the brothers were equally strong, they killed each other as they fought.

The Pandava brothers heeded Narada's warning.

69. Draupadi Becomes a Mother

The five Pandava brothers had agreed to share Draupadi as their wife, and each brother was her husband for one year at a time. As the year ended and Draupadi's time with one husband ended and another husband began, she would walk through fire and thus regain her virginity, year after year.

Over time, Draupadi had five sons, one with each of the Pandavas; they were known as the Upapandavas.

Her son with Yudhishtira was Prativindhya.

Her son with Bhima was Sutasoma.

Her son with Arjuna was Shrutakarma.

Her son with Nakula was Shatanika.

Her son with Sahadeva was Shrutasena.

70. Arjuna Violates the Agreement

Then the unthinkable happened: rushing to see Yudhishtira, Arjuna walked in on Yudhishtira with Draupadi. Because he violated their brotherly agreement, Arjuna went into self-imposed exile.

It wasn't really Arjuna's fault. To ensure Draupadi's privacy when she was with each husband, the current husband would leave his shoes outside the door as a sign that he was inside. A dog, however, had stolen Yudhishtira's shoes, which is why Arjuna walked in unsuspecting.

In her rage, Draupadi cursed all dogs. "You will copulate in public for all to see!" she decreed. "That will be the shame of dogs henceforth and forever."

71. Arjuna Comes to a Deadly Lake

In his exile, Arjuna came to a lake infested with deadly crocodiles. Unafraid, he jumped into the water. A crocodile seized him, but Arjuna wrestled with the crocodile and finally dragged it ashore.

Then, to Arjuna's surprise, the crocodile turned into a beautiful apsara!

She urged Arjuna to wrestle with the other crocodiles in the lake; they all turned into apsaras.

"A rishi cursed us to become crocodiles," they said, "but we knew a kshatriya would free us."

The apsaras returned to heaven, and the people of the land were able to safely bathe in the waters of the lake.

72. Arjuna Meets Ulupi

After a long day's walk, Arjuna reached a river. Eager to wash the dust off his body, he jumped into the water, but something grabbed him, pulling him down. Arjuna struggled, but he could not break free.

Then, to his surprise, he saw that it was a beautiful woman who had seized him. "Marry me, Arjuna!" she said. "I am Ulupi, princess of the nagas."

Arjuna made love to Ulupi, and she finally let him go.

Arjuna then continued his journey, forgetting all about her.

But many years later, he would meet their son, Iravan, at the battle of Kurukshetra.

73. Arjuna Elopes with Subhadra

Arjuna came to Dwaraka, the home of his good friend Krishna.

Krishna's sister Subhadra was deeply in love with Arjuna, but her brother Balarama had arranged for her to marry Duryodhana.

Krishna didn't hesitate: he urged Arjuna to elope with Subhadra. Arjuna entered the city disguised as a beggar. Even in this disguise, Subhadra recognized him immediately, and the two fled the city on his chariot. Subhadra drove the chariot while Arjuna shot arrows at their pursuers.

Krishna was able to soothe his brother Balarama's anger, but not so Duryodhana: the incident only added to his hatred for the Pandavas.

THE GAME



74. Duryodhana Visits Indraprastha

After Arjuna returned, the Pandavas organized a grand coronation ceremony for Yudhishtira and invited the royal families from neighboring kingdoms as their guests. Their cousin Duryodhana was one of those guests.

Seeing the splendid palace of Indraprastha, built by the magic of the divine Mayasura, Duryodhana raged with jealousy.

Mistaking a shimmering marble floor for a pool, he tucked up his garment to stay dry. The Pandavas laughed.

Next, Duryodhana got drenched falling into a pool that he thought was a floor, and the Pandavas laughed even louder. “He sees no better than his father,” Draupadi joked.

Duryodhana vowed revenge.

75. Shishupala Insults Krishna

From among the many illustrious guests at Yudhishtira's coronation, the Pandavas chose Krishna as guest-of-honor.

This enraged Shishupala, King of Chedi. "Krishna isn't even a king! He deserves only contempt, not honor!"

Shishupala went on insulting Krishna, who was his cousin, and Krishna bore his insults patiently, having promised Shishupala's mother long ago that he would accept one hundred insults from her son without complaint.

After the hundredth insult, Krishna said, "Be warned, Shishupala. One more insult, and you will die."

But Shishupala would not stop. "Peasant! Coward! Thief!" he shouted.

Krishna let loose his Sudarshana-Chakra and severed Shishupala's head.

76. King Yudhishthira Makes a Vow

Vyasa left his forest ashram to visit his grandsons. “I have seen alarming omens,” he told the Pandavas. “The next thirteen years are filled with danger, and your actions will lead to terrible consequences. All the kshatriyas might perish. Your fate will be their doom, King Yudhishthira.”

Yudhishthira then took a vow. “For the next thirteen years, I will speak no harsh word to anyone. Harsh words lead to conflict; with soft words, I will create no discord. By this vow I seek to avert my fate.”

Meanwhile, Duryodhana returned to Hastinapura, where he plotted revenge with his uncle Shakuni.

77. Duryodhana Plots with Shakuni

King Dhritarashtra had a lavish new palace built for Duryodhana, hoping to calm his jealousy of Yudhishtira's palace, but to no avail. Duryodhana was still determined to get revenge.

Rebuffed by his father, Duryodhana plotted with Shakuni, his mother's brother. "I want the Pandavas to lose everything!" Duryodhana snarled. "What do you advise?"

"You cannot wage war against them," Shakuni replied, "but you could challenge Yudhishtira to a game of dice. Royal honor will require him to accept your invitation, but he has absolutely no skill at dice. I will compete for you against him, and I will surely win."

78. Duryodhana Extends an Invitation

Duryodhana sent Vidura to Indraprastha as his messenger, and Yudhishtira received his uncle happily; Vidura had always been a friend to them.

“What news from Hastinapura?” Yudhishtira asked.

“King Dhritarashtra has built a new palace to rival your palace here,” said Vidura. “And your cousin Duryodhana invites you there for a game of dice.”

Before Yudhishtira could reply, Bhima shouted, “It’s a trick.”

Draupadi added, “I do not think we should go, husband.”

“But Duryodhana knows I cannot refuse,” Yudhishtira said, hesitantly. “You may tell our cousin that we accept his invitation.”

Vidura then returned to Hastinapura, full of foreboding.

79. The Pandavas Enter the Gambling Hall

When the Pandavas arrived at Hastinapura, King Dhritarashtra greeted them warmly, ushering them into the new palace, while Draupadi went to the women's quarters to greet Queen Kunti and the other royal ladies.

"I cannot see the splendor myself," said Dhritarashtra, "but everyone tells me the palace is exceedingly beautiful. Tell me what you think, Yudhishtira!"

"It is indeed very beautiful," said Yudhishtira.

Then Yudhishtira saw Duryodhana, accompanied by his uncle Shakuni.

"Are you ready for our little gambling match?" Duryodhana asked, smiling. "Shakuni is going to play in my stead."

Hiding his surprise, Yudhishtira replied calmly, "I am ready."

80. The Game Begins

Yudhishtira faced Shakuni, who played for his nephew, Duryodhana.

Then the game began.

First, they bet a few pearls. Shakuni won.

Then a golden chariot. "I have won!" said Shakuni.

Elephants and armies. "I have won!" said Shakuni.

Enormous herds of cattle. "I have won!" said Shakuni.

The wealth of entire kingdoms. "I have won!" said Shakuni.

Vidura begged King Dhritarashtra to stop the match, but the king did nothing.

Yudhishtira staked his brothers one by one. He lost.

Yudhishtira staked himself. He lost.

Yudhishtira staked his wife Draupadi. He lost.

Yudhishtira had nothing left. Shakuni had won it all.

81. Duryodhana Summons Draupadi

Shakuni's success in the gambling match thrilled Duryodhana. He had taken everything from his cousin Yudhishthira.

Everything.

"Bring Draupadi here!" he commanded his brother Dushasana. "She is my slave now, a queen no longer."

But when Dushasana told Draupadi what had happened, she refused to come. "Ask Duryodhana whether my husband had lost himself already when he staked me," she said angrily. "If he had lost himself, he could not stake me afterwards."

When Dushasana returned to the assembly hall and repeated Draupadi's words, Duryodhana howled in rage. "She is my slave!" he shouted. "Bring her here now. No excuses!"

82. Dushasana Brings Draupadi into the Assembly

Dushasana returned to fetch Draupadi. “You are Duryodhana’s slave!” he shouted. “Come with me!”

“But I have my period,” Draupadi tried to explain. “I’m barely dressed. I can’t go out like this.”

“Silence, slave!” Dushasana commanded.

Grabbing Draupadi by the hair, he dragged her before the assembly.

Everyone stared in shock, but said nothing.

“Husbands, you must help me!” Draupadi moaned. “Mothers, fathers! Uncles and grandfathers! Do you say nothing? Is there no justice in this assembly?”

“This whore has quite a tongue,” Shakuni joked, and Duryodhana laughed, while Yudhishtira and his brothers wept silently, bowing their heads in shame.

83. Duryodhana Seeks to Disrobe Draupadi

“Strip off your clothes, slaves!” Duryodhana commanded.
“Now!”

The Pandavas stripped until they stood in only their loincloths.

“You too, whore!” Duryodhana ordered Draupadi.
“Strip!”

At a nod from Duryodhana, Dushasana reached for Draupadi’s sari and began to pull, but Draupadi closed her eyes and prayed. “Lord Vishnu, save me,” she murmured.
“Save me, God! Save me!”

Dushasana pulled off her sari, but there was another sari underneath, and another, an unending stream of cloth. Dushasana pulled and pulled until he became so entangled in the heap of cloth that he could pull no more.

God had heard Draupadi’s prayer.

84. Bhima Makes a Vow

Despite the miracle, Duryodhana continued to taunt Draupadi, baring his thigh. “Come, slave! Sit on your master’s thigh.”

Bhima shouted, “I’ll smash your thigh someday, Duryodhana! As for you, Dushasana: I’ll rip you open and drink your blood!”

“My hair will stay unbound,” Draupadi vowed, “until I wash it in Dushasana’s blood.”

“Death to you all!” Bhima added. “Death to Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers!”

As Bhima spoke, the dice-board burst into flames.

Vidura could stay silent no longer. “Draupadi has God’s protection. You all saw it. Brother, you must do something,” he said to Dhritarashtra, “before it’s too late!”

85. King Dhritarashtra Grants Draupadi a Boon

“Enough!” shouted King Dhritarashtra, intervening at last. Then he turned his blind eyes towards Draupadi. “You have been steadfast throughout this ordeal. Make a request, and I will grant it.”

Draupadi replied immediately. “Free Yudhishtira from slavery!”

“Done!” agreed Dhritarashtra. “Make another request.”

“Free Yudhishtira’s brothers,” Draupadi said.

“Done! You may make a third request.”

“That is all,” Draupadi said. “I ask for nothing more.”

“Then I restore everything!” proclaimed Dhritarashtra. “Wealth, kingdoms, power, everything you lost is yours again. Return to your home in peace.”

So Draupadi and her husbands mounted their chariots and began the journey to Indraprastha.

86. Duryodhana Demands a Rematch

“Summon Yudhishtira to play another game,” Duryodhana shouted at his father. “Quickly, before they gather their armies and attack us.”

“My own nephews... attack us?” Dhritarashtra exclaimed. “It’s unthinkable!”

“Jackals howled the night you were born, my son,” moaned Gandhari, “an omen that you would bring destruction upon us. Now I realize the prophecies were true. Calm your rage, I beg you.”

But Duryodhana refused to listen to his mother and father. “Send a messenger on the swiftest horse,” he commanded. “Bring Yudhishtira back here for another game of dice. With Shakuni’s help I’ll finish him once and for all.”

87. Yudhishtira Gambles Again

Duryodhana's messenger overtook the Pandavas. "Duryodhana challenges you again!" he said. "The losers will be exiled into the wilderness for twelve years, followed by one year in disguise. If they are discovered in that year, another thirteen years of exile will follow."

Again, Yudhishtira's sense of royal duty meant he could not refuse the challenge.

Again, Shakuni won.

The Pandavas had to go into exile.

"Let Kunti stay here with us," Vidura said, and the Pandavas tearfully bid their mother farewell.

As they left Hastinapura, the Kauravas mocked their cousins, but the people pitied the princes and their noble wife.

THE PANDAVAS IN EXILE



88. The Exile Begins

Many faithful followers accompanied the Pandavas and Draupadi into the wilderness.

“Please go home,” Yudhishthira told them. “The forest is dangerous, and I cannot keep you safe. Return to Hastinapura, and we too shall return when our years of exile are complete.”

Yudhishthira was worried how they would feed themselves in the wilderness; they could not feed all these followers too.

The family priest then urged Yudhishthira to pray to Surya, the sun-god, source of the world’s bounty. Surya appeared and gave Yudhishthira a copper bowl.

“Let Draupadi cook with this bowl,” Surya said, “and it will always be full.”

89. The Story of Kurukshetra

During their exile, the forest rishis told the Pandavas many stories, including this story about their ancestor, King Kuru.

King Kuru took his plow and went into the field. He ran out of seed, so he cut off his flesh for seed, watering the field with his blood.

“King Kuru, what do you want?” Indra asked. “I will grant you a boon!”

“I need nothing,” replied Kuru, “but please bless this land so that anyone who dies here in the act of renunciation or in the act of war will ascend to heaven!”

Indra agreed. That field was Kuru-kshetra, Kuru-Field.

90. The Story of Rama

“Has any king suffered more than I?” Yudhishtira asked the rishis.

“Listen to Rama’s story,” the rishi Maitreya told him. “Rama was blameless, but his father, King Dasharatha, exiled him at the behest of a jealous queen. For fourteen years, Rama lived as a forest hermit with his brother, Lakshmana, and his wife, Sita. Then the king of the rakshasas, Ravana, kidnapped Sita, and Rama had to wage a war to rescue her. He had no human allies, but with an army of monkeys, including the monkey-god Hanuman, he defeated Ravana. Only after all those hardships did Rama become king.”

91. The Story of Nala

“There was also King Nala,” Maitreya continued. “He lost his kingdom in a gambling match with his own brother, who then exiled Nala to the forest. Nala’s loyal wife, Damayanti, accompanied him. Feeling ashamed, Nala abandoned her in the forest to live out his exile alone. Damayanti spent years searching for Nala but couldn’t find him anywhere. Damayanti’s father organized a swayamvara for her to choose a new husband, and Nala arrived, serving as charioteer to one of the kings seeking a bride. Damayanti recognized him, and together they won back Nala’s kingdom and ruled again as king and queen.”

92. The Story of Savitri

Maitreya then told another story. “King Ashwapati’s daughter Savitri chose to marry Satyavan, a prince living in poverty in the forest, supporting his blind father, a king who had lost his kingdom. Even worse: the royal astrologer predicted Satyavan would die in one year. But Savitri loved him, and when Yama took Satyavan to the land of the dead, she followed. ‘You cannot follow!’ Yama said, but Savitri persisted. Impressed, Yama granted her a wish. ‘I want to bear Satyavan’s children,’ she said. Thus Yama had to restore Satyavan’s life, thanks to Savitri.”

“I like that story,” said Draupadi, smiling.

93. The Rishi Maitreya Curses Duryodhana

After visiting the Pandavas in their forest exile, the rishi Maitreya went to Hastinapura. “You must make peace between your sons and your nephews,” he said to King Dhritarashtra. “If not, it will lead to the annihilation of your family line.”

But Duryodhana just laughed at Maitreya and slapped his thigh as he had done when taunting Draupadi.

“I curse you, Duryodhana!” said Maitreya. “One day Bhima will crush that thigh.”

“Take back your curse!” begged Duryodhana, truly alarmed.

“The only solution is to make peace with the Pandavas,” Maitreya replied.

But Duryodhana would never make peace with his cousins.

94. Jayadratha Comes to the Forest

Draupadi was surprised to see Jayadratha, King of Sindhu, approach their forest camp in his chariot; he was the husband of Duryodhana's sister, Duhshala.

"Perhaps he brings a message from Hastinapura," Draupadi thought.

"My husbands are hunting," she explained, "but they will return soon."

"I came to see you!" Jayadratha replied. "Leave this wretched wilderness and come with me. I'll be your new husband."

"How dare you!" Draupadi screamed as Jayadratha grabbed her.

"You're a whore for the taking," Jayadratha shouted at her angrily. "And I'm going to take you!"

He then threw her in his chariot and rode away.

95. The Pandavas Stop Jayadratha

The rishis heard Draupadi screaming, and they ran to find the Pandavas.

Arjuna quickly caught up with Jayadratha and used fire-arrows to incinerate his chariot wheels. Bhima then jumped on Jayadratha and began pummeling him with his mighty fists, while the twins kicked him from left and right.

“Stop!” Yudhishtira shouted. “Don’t kill him. He is married to the only sister in our family.”

“Then I’ll humiliate him for everyone to see,” said Bhima, and he pulled out all of Jayadratha’s hair, leaving just five tufts sticking out, one for each of the Pandavas to whom Jayadratha owed his life.

96. Bhima Searches for Lotuses

A golden lotus blown by the wind landed at Draupadi's feet. "How lovely!" she said.

"I'll bring you more," Bhima said eagerly, racing off to gather more lotuses.

He soon found his path blocked by a monkey's tail.

"Move your tail!" Bhima shouted at the sleeping monkey.

The monkey didn't move.

"I said: MOVE YOUR TAIL."

"I'm old," the monkey replied. "You move it."

But Bhima couldn't move the tail: it was too heavy!

Then the monkey rose up tall as a mountain.

"Lord Hanuman!" Bhima exclaimed, happily saluting his brother, for they were both sons of the wind-god, Vayu.

97. A Python Captures Bhima

One day, a python grabbed Bhima. As Bhima struggled, the snake said, “I was King Nahusha. I took Indraloka from Indra. I also took Indra’s queen, Shachi. But she tricked me: she said the Saptarishis must carry me to her on a palanquin, and when the rishis walked slowly, I kicked one in the head. He cursed me to live as a python until someone named Yudhishthira freed me.”

“Yudhishthira’s my brother!” Bhima shouted.

“You’re jussssst sssssaying that...” hissed the python.

“Help!” Bhima yelled.

His brothers came running and, at Yudhishthira’s touch, Nahusha shed his snake-body and ascended to heaven.

98. Vyasa Advises Yudhishtira

Yudhishtira apologized for the suffering he had brought upon his family. “I gambled because I wanted to depose Duryodhana so that we could rule the whole kingdom,” he confessed. “But I realize anger about this serves no purpose now. I must practice patience, certain that someday we’ll regain our kingdom.”

Draupadi and the others, however, did not share Yudhishtira’s equanimity.

Then Vyasa arrived, and he taught Yudhishtira a mantra that controlled a great weapon. “Teach this mantra to Arjuna,” he said, “and send Arjuna out to search for more weapons. You must be prepared for the war that is coming.”

99. Arjuna Encounters a Hunter

Arjuna ascended a sacred mountain and meditated deeply, praying to Shiva.

As he prayed, a boar attacked.

Arjuna emerged from meditation, grabbed his bow, and shot the boar.

To Arjuna's surprise, another arrow struck the boar. "The boar is mine!" shouted a hunter emerging from the trees.

"No!" protested Arjuna. "It's mine!"

They fought, and Arjuna could not overcome this hunter. He appealed to Shiva for help, throwing a garland on the Shiva-statue he had made.

The garland appeared around the hunter's neck!

"You are Shiva!" Arjuna shouted, bowing down.

Shiva was pleased and rewarded Arjuna with the Pashupata weapon.

100. Arjuna Visits Indra's Heaven

Indra, king of the gods, took his son Arjuna to heaven, and there Arjuna acquired many weapons. He also learned music and dancing from the gandharvas and apsaras.

The apsara Urvashi fell in love with Arjuna, but Arjuna rebuffed her. "You're like a mother to me," he said, "as you were once married to Pururavas, my ancestor."

"Because you've failed me as a man," Urvashi said angrily, "I curse you to be a eunuch."

"Don't worry," Indra told Arjuna. "Her curse will last only one year, thus keeping you safe in the year of exile you must spend in disguise."

101. The Pandavas Are Reunited

After years spent acquiring weapons, Arjuna joyfully rejoined his brothers. Their long exile was easier to bear when they were all together.

Duryodhana, meanwhile, was troubled when he heard about Arjuna's newly acquired weapons.

"Fear not," said Shakuni. "They are beggars, nothing like the princes they once were. Take your most magnificent army now, before they enter their year of disguise, and show them your might and power!"

"I like this plan," Duryodhana said, smiling.

Duryodhana then marched an army into the forest and set up camp with music and merriment, sending a messenger to his cousins with an invitation.

102. Duryodhana Fights the Gandharvas

On his way to the Pandavas, Duryodhana's messenger met a gandharva, sent by the gods to cause trouble. And trouble there was: the messenger fought with the gandharva, and soon Duryodhana himself and his whole army were fighting with an army of gandharvas.

Then the gandharvas took Duryodhana prisoner, while Duryodhana's soldiers all fled in fear.

When Yudhishtira learned the news, he sent Bhima and Arjuna to rescue Duryodhana. "He's still our cousin after all," Yudhishtira said. So Bhima and Arjuna rescued Duryodhana, and they taunted him for needing their help.

The incident made Duryodhana hate the Pandavas even more.

103. The Pandavas Look for Water

Tracking a deer deep into the forest, the Pandavas grew tired and thirsty. “We’ll rest here,” Yudhishtira said, “and you look for water, Nakula.”

Nakula found a lake, and began to drink when a voice shouted, “Stop!”

Nakula saw no one, just a crane.

“Stop!” It was the crane who spoke. “You must answer my questions before you drink.”

But Nakula was so thirsty that he could not resist. He drank. He died.

When Nakula did not return, Yudhishtira sent Sahadeva. Then Arjuna. Then Bhima.

Then Yudhishtira himself came to the lake, and he saw his brothers lying there, dead.

104. Yudhishtira Answers the Questions

Yudhishtira wept when he saw his dead brothers. Then he bent down to drink, and the crane said, "Stop! Answer my questions first."

Unlike his brothers, Yudhishtira obeyed. "Ask your questions!" he said, and the crane transformed into a mighty yaksha.

"What is faster than wind?" the yaksha asked.

"The mind," replied Yudhishtira.

"What is more numerous than the grasses?"

"Our thoughts."

"Who journeys always alone?"

"The sun."

"What enemy is invincible?"

"Anger."

The questions went on and on; Yudhishtira answered them all.

"You have answered well," said the yaksha. "You may revive one of your brothers. Choose which one."

105. The Yaksha Revives the Pandavas

Yudhishtira answered the yaksha instantly. "Let Nakula live!"

"You surprise me," said the yaksha. "He is Madri's son."

"And I am Kunti's son," said Yudhishtira. "The sons of both mothers must survive this exile."

"You are indeed righteous!" said the yaksha. "I will revive all four."

The four Pandavas arose, amazed to see a mighty yaksha standing there.

Then the yaksha transformed. Before them stood Yama, the god of dharma, Yudhishtira's father. "I used the deer to lure you, my son," Yama explained. "I was testing you, and you have done well. I give all five of you my blessing."

106. The Pandavas Go to King Virata

After twelve years of exile in the forest, the Pandavas and Draupadi had to spend a thirteenth year in disguise. If they were discovered, the exile would begin again. They decided to hide together in the court of King Virata in Matsya.

Yudhishtira became Kanka, playing dice with the king; during his time in exile Yudhishtira had become very skilled at dice.

Bhima became Vallabha, a cook.

Arjuna became Brihannala, a eunuch who taught the ladies dancing and music.

Nakula became Granthika, a trainer of horses.

Sahadeva became Tantipala, a herder of cattle.

Draupadi became Sairandhri, maid to Queen Sudeshna.

107. Kichaka Pursues Draupadi

Before joining the court of King Virata as servants, the Pandavas tied their weapons and armor in a bundle and hid the bundle in a tree that stood in the cremation grounds.

Then they entered Virata's court and, thanks to the blessing of Yama, no one recognized them as the Pandavas.

The year of disguise was almost complete when disaster struck: Queen Sudeshna's brother, a general named Kichaka, became obsessed with Draupadi.

"I'm married to five powerful gandharvas," Draupadi told him, "and they watch over me. You must leave me alone, for your own good."

But Kichaka ignored her warnings.

108. Draupadi Seeks Protection

Draupadi appealed to Queen Sudeshna. “Dear Sairandhri,” she said, “my brother Kichaka is harmless, I assure you.”

Draupadi, however, knew she was in serious danger. She threw herself on the king’s mercy, but he ignored her, and Yudhishtira, who was playing dice with the king at the time, said nothing.

Draupadi felt betrayed once again, as she had at the dice game in Hastinapura years ago.

But this time, Bhima came to her aid. “I will protect you, Draupadi,” he said, and he told Draupadi to invite Kichaka to the dancing hall that night. “I’ll do the rest,” Bhima promised.

109. Bhima Kills Kichaka

“Come to the dancing hall tonight,” Draupadi told Kichaka. “I’ll show you my special dance.”

The hall was dark when Kichaka arrived. “Sairandhri,” he cooed, “where are you?”

“HERE!” boomed a voice. It was Bhima, who grabbed Kichaka and squeezed him to death, crushing him into a big ball of flesh.

Suspicion fell on Draupadi, and King Virata threatened to throw her on Kichaka’s funeral pyre.

“I warned him about my powerful gandharva husbands,” Draupadi protested, “but he didn’t listen!”

Now King Virata was afraid too, and he spared Draupadi.

Thus Draupadi and the Pandavas remained in the king’s service.

110. Duryodhana Searches for the Pandavas

The thirteenth year was almost over. Duryodhana sent his spies everywhere, but he could not find the Pandavas.

Then he heard about the mysterious gandharvas who had killed his friend Kichaka in the court of King Virata. "That must be the Pandavas! I'm sure of it!"

Drona and Bhishma both urged restraint. "If you find the Pandavas, make peace with them," they advised. Even Dushasana tried to persuade his brother to set aside his obsession with the Pandavas.

But Duryodhana did not listen. He was determined to find the Pandavas and thus condemn them to another thirteen years of exile.

111. Duryodhana Attacks Virata

Duryodhana was allied with Susharman, king of Trigarta and an enemy of King Virata.

“We should attack Virata now,” said Susharman, “and steal his cattle! Without Kichaka to lead his army, Virata will be defenseless.”

This plan delighted Duryodhana, and he launched an attack immediately.

Virata commanded his young son, Prince Uttara, to defend the kingdom, but Uttara did not even have a charioteer.

“I will be your charioteer,” said Brihannala, and Uttara burst out laughing. “You are the dancing teacher!” he scoffed. “I need a warrior to escort me.”

“Trust me,” said Brihannala. “I will carry you to victory.”

112. Prince Uttara and Arjuna Ride into Battle

Brihannala then drove straight to the cremation grounds.

“Fool!” Uttara shouted. “What are you doing?”

“Preparing for victory,” he replied, opening the bundle of weapons. “Behold, the Gandiva bow! And I am Prince Arjuna.”

“Forgive me,” said Uttara, astonished. “I will drive the chariot.”

Arjuna then blew his conch, and Drona recognized the sound.

“It’s Arjuna,” he exclaimed. Then he turned to Duryodhana. “Sire, you should return to Hastinapura. Now is not the time for you to fight the Pandavas.”

“Now is exactly the time!” replied Duryodhana.

And so the Kauravas prepared to face Arjuna and Virata’s army in battle.

113. Arjuna Faces the Kauravas in Battle

The thirteenth year of exile had ended at midnight, and Duryodhana had not found the Pandavas in time, which only made him more determined to defeat them in battle. He sent Karna against Arjuna; they fought fiercely, and Karna finally left the field drenched in his own blood.

Arjuna then used a mantra to put the Kauravas to sleep and commanded Prince Uttara to strip their clothes to take as trophies.

Back at the palace, Arjuna resumed his identity as Brihannala.

“Take the trophies to your father and tell him you won the battle,” he said, and Uttara smiled gratefully.

114. King Virata Boasts about Prince Uttara

“What say you, Kanka?” King Virata asked his dicing partner. “Isn’t my son Uttara a remarkable warrior?”

“Indeed, my lord!” replied Yudhishtira. “Although his eunuch charioteer is even more remarkable.”

Enraged, Virata threw the dice at Yudhishtira, striking him in the forehead and drawing blood. Draupadi rushed to catch every drop, knowing that death awaited anyone who spilled Yudhishtira’s blood to the ground.

Uttara was shocked, aware as he was now of Yudhishtira’s identity. “Take care with that old brahmin,” he warned his father. “He might curse you.”

The king apologized, and Yudhishtira said soothingly, “It is already forgotten, sire.”

THE RETURN OF THE PANDAVAS



115. The Pandavas Reveal Themselves

Soon after the cattle-raid, King Virata was surprised to see Kanka sitting on the royal throne, with the cook and the dancing teacher beside him, plus the cowherd and a stableboy, and even his wife's maid, dressed up in royal robes.

Suddenly, it all made sense. "King Yudhishtira!" he exclaimed, bowing.

"Our exile is over," Yudhishtira said, smiling. "We hid ourselves here for the thirteenth year."

Virata then offered his daughter, Uttarai, Uttara's sister, in marriage to Arjuna, but Arjuna proposed instead that his son Abhimanyu marry the princess. Thus King Virata became an ally of the Pandavas by marriage.

116. Yudhishtira Hopes for Peace

Krishna rejoiced at the wedding of Uttarai and Abhimanyu, the son of his sister Subhadra. Although he was young, Abhimanyu was an accomplished warrior. He had begun his training already in the womb, listening as his father discussed battle strategies and formations with Krishna. Abhimanyu remembered everything, and he would use his knowledge in the coming war.

“I have sent word to Duryodhana,” Yudhishtira told the guests, “asking him to return our half of the kingdom. Let us all now hope for peace.”

“Though we must also be ready for war,” Krishna added, and then he went home to Dwaraka.

117. Dhritarashtra Sends an Envoy of Peace

Although Duryodhana and Karna advocated for war, King Dhritarashtra decided to send his charioteer Sanjaya to Yudhishtira with an offer of peace.

“I too desire peace,” Yudhishtira told Sanjaya. “I only ask for Indraprastha, the city that my brothers and I built in the wilderness. Give us back what is ours, and there will be no war.”

“You ask only for what is right,” said Sanjaya. “But I am afraid that Duryodhana will refuse.”

“Then give us just five villages,” said Yudhishtira, “one for each son of Pandu. That will be enough. Take that message to the Kauravas in Hastinapura.”

118. Dhritarashtra Seeks Advice

When Sanjaya returned from meeting with Yudhishtira, King Dhritarashtra was uncertain what to do and asked his brother Vidura for advice.

“You must disown Duryodhana,” Vidura told him, “as ill omens at his birth foretold. Although he is your son, he is no better than a viper. Yudhishtira is a worthy heir, righteous and true to his word. Let Yudhishtira rule the kingdom. That is the only way you will know peace.”

“I realize you are right,” Dhritarashtra admitted, “but I am strapped to Time’s wheel; it turns me, and I cannot escape.”

And so King Dhritarashtra rejected Vidura’s advice.

119. Arjuna and Duryodhana Go to Dwaraka

As war loomed, Arjuna went to Dwaraka to ask Krishna for help, and Duryodhana did the same. Krishna was asleep when they arrived; Duryodhana sat at the head of Krishna's bed, and Arjuna sat reverently at Krishna's feet.

When Krishna awoke, he saw Arjuna first, and then Duryodhana.

"I have my armies to offer," said Krishna, "and I offer myself, but not as a warrior. Let Arjuna choose first, as I saw him first."

"I choose you," Arjuna said without hesitation.

Duryodhana rejoiced because he also got what he wanted: armies of Yadava warriors who would fight on his side.

120. Whose Side Will Balarama Join?

Krishna agreed to be Arjuna's charioteer, while Krishna's army would fight for Duryodhana. Everyone wondered whose side Krishna's brother Balarama would take.

Duryodhana went to Balarama and said, "You must help me defeat the Pandavas! They stopped me from marrying your sister, and your sister's son now plots against me. The Pandavas are your enemies too!"

"Don't listen to him!" countered Bhima. "Your brother Krishna is on our side, as you should be."

Balarama sighed, for he loved them both. "I reject this war," he said. "I will fight on neither side. Only fools reject the possibility of peace."

121. King Shalya Makes an Alliance

Shalya, king of Madra, planned to ally himself with the Pandavas, as his sister Madri had been Pandu's wife.

Duryodhana, however, learned about this and put up pavilions filled with food and drink along the Madra highway. Shalya assumed this was Yudhishtira's doing. "I promise my host a boon of his choosing!" Shalya proclaimed.

To Shalya's surprise, Duryodhana claimed the boon and asked Shalya to fight in his army.

"You are bound by your promise," Yudhishtira said later, "but when Karna and Arjuna confront each other in battle, help Arjuna if you can."

Shalya agreed to do as Yudhishtira asked.

122. Duryodhana Insists on War

Duryodhana rejected all proposals of peace. "I will kill the Pandavas and rule the world," he declared, "or the Pandavas will kill me. There is no other way."

"My guru Parusharama taught me the mantra of the Brahmastra," Karna added. "With this weapon I can destroy the Pandavas myself."

"Your conceit deceives you," Bhishma said to Karna. "You know nothing of what awaits you."

"I know that I will not fight so long as you are fighting!" Karna shouted at Bhishma, and he then stormed out of the assembly.

Bhishma scoffed. "With such allies, Duryodhana brings disaster upon us all."

123. Krishna Consoles the Pandavas

As Yudhishtira contemplated the coming war, he despaired. "Is there no way to obtain peace?" he asked Krishna.

"I myself will go to Hastinapura," Krishna offered. "I have no hope of changing Duryodhana's mind, but this way you will know we tried every option."

Sahadeva, alone among his brothers, rejected peace. "For what Duryodhana tried to do to Draupadi," he said, "we must kill him, and Shakuni too."

Draupadi agreed. "I too hope Krishna's mission will fail," she admitted.

"The wrongs you have suffered will be avenged," Krishna promised her. "The war is coming, and no one can stop it."

124. Dhritarashtra Learns of Krishna's Coming

When he learned of Krishna's visit, King Dhritarashtra rejoiced. "We must greet this emissary with gold and jewels and every honor!" he exclaimed.

Vidura rebuked his brother's exuberance. "Just give the Pandavas their five villages," he said. "That will please Krishna more."

But, as before, Dhritarashtra ignored Vidura's advice.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana had a plan of his own. "I think we should capture Krishna and hold him prisoner."

His words shocked Dhritarashtra, and he rebuked his son. "You must not say such things. You must not even think them!"

But Duryodhana thought of nothing else as he eagerly awaited Krishna's arrival.

125. Krishna Comes to Hastinapura

Bhishma, Drona, and all the elders of Hastinapura escorted Krishna to the palace.

There Krishna visited Kunti, who hadn't seen her sons for thirteen years. "Tell them they must act now," she said. "The time has come for them to destroy their enemies."

Duryodhana invited Krishna to a banquet, but Krishna refused.

"You hate the Pandavas," he said, "so you hate me. I won't eat the food of hatred with you. I will go to Vidura's house instead."

At dinner, Vidura warned Krishna of Duryodhana's plans, but Krishna only smiled. "I fear nothing," he said, "nor should you, my friend."

126. Krishna Addresses the Assembly

“Five villages for the Pandavas,” Krishna announced to the assembly. “That’s all they ask.”

“No! They lost their kingdom!” Duryodhana shouted. “I will give them not so much as a needlepoint of land.”

Duryodhana then summoned his allies to seize Krishna, but Krishna laughed and revealed himself in his divine form containing the sun and moon and stars, with all the world’s armies around him.

Dhritarashtra even regained his sight at that moment; he too saw God.

Duryodhana could not seize Krishna because Krishna was... everything.

Krishna then put on mortal form again and left the assembly in stunned silence.

127. Krishna Speaks with Karna

Before leaving Hastinapura, Krishna sought out Karna. "Because I love you," Krishna said, "I tell you the truth: you are Kunti's first-born son, Yudhishtira's elder brother. Yudhishtira doesn't know this, but if you tell him, he will gladly make you king. Go to him, Karna. It is the right thing to do."

"It cannot be right for me to betray Duryodhana," Karna replied. "Duryodhana is my friend, and the Pandavas are my enemies. The truth of my birth changes nothing."

"And your loyalty is Duryodhana's doom," Krishna said sadly.

Thus Krishna's mission failed: he could not stop the coming war.

THE WAR



128. The Armies Assemble

“It is war then,” said Yudhishtira, and he appointed generals to lead his seven armies, including his brother Bhima, along with Draupadi’s father Drupada and Drupada’s sons Dhristadyumna and Shikhandin.

Duryodhana had eleven armies to Yudhishtira’s seven, and Bhishma was his supreme commander. Karna, however, had vowed that he wouldn’t fight while Bhishma was in command, so he bided his time on the sidelines.

The armies marched to Kurukshetra, the battlefield where they would meet.

Dhritarashtra’s charioteer Sanjaya, by a divine gift, could see what was happening on the battlefield, and thus he narrated to Dhritarashtra everything as it occurred.

129. The Story of the Lakes at Kurukshetra

This was not the first time Kurukshetra tasted kshatriya blood. The brahmin-warrior Parashurama had dug five lakes there, the Samanta-Panchaka, filled with the blood of the kshatriyas he killed.

Shortly before the war began at Kurukshetra, there was a solar eclipse, and the great kings had all come to purify themselves by bathing in the Samanta-Panchaka. The Pandavas were in exile then, but the other kings who would later fight at Kurukshetra attended the ritual.

As Krishna watched the kings bathing, he had a vision of them all covered in blood. War was coming, and these kings would not survive.

130. The Story of Vishnu and Bhudevi

Long ago, the earth-goddess Bhudevi took the form of a cow. She generously gave her milk to the people of the earth.

The kings of the earth, however, milked her so greedily that her udders became sore, and she groaned in pain.

The god Vishnu heard her cries. "I will teach those greedy kings not to treat you this way," he promised. "I will come as Parashurama and spill the blood of kings on the earth, and you will drink their blood like a lioness. I will do the same as Rama, and again as Krishna. That is my promise."

131. Kali Demands a Sacrifice

“To win this war, ” Krishna said, “we must sacrifice to the goddess Kali.” Then he pointed to one of the soldiers. “We must sacrifice you!”

“But who is he?” asked Arjuna, surprised.

“I am Iravan, your son,” said the soldier to Arjuna. “My mother is Ulupi, the naga princess. I gladly offer myself, but I don’t want to die a bachelor. Let me marry first!”

No woman would marry this man fated to die, so Krishna became Mohini, a beautiful woman, and Mohini married Iravan. The next morning, they sacrificed Iravan to Kali, and Mohini wept for her dead husband.

132. Iravan Watches the Battle

To satisfy Kali, Iravan cut himself into thirty-two pieces, each marked with a sacred sign, and Yudhishtira offered this flesh to the goddess.

When Iravan was done, only his head and spine remained.

Krishna then spoke to the dead warrior. "Pray to Shesha-Naga, your grandfather, and he will restore your flesh."

Iravan's lips moved in prayer, and Shesha appeared, coiling around Iravan's spine and restoring flesh to his corpse.

Iravan's eyes were still open, and Krishna realized he wanted to watch the war, so they placed Iravan's corpse high in a tree where he could look down upon the battlefield.

133. Arjuna Arrives at Kurukshetra

Krishna had said he would not fight, but he did agree to be Arjuna's charioteer, and so he drove Arjuna out onto the battlefield.

When Arjuna saw the enemy lines filled with kinsmen and friends whom he loved, Drona and Bhishma and many others, he fell to his knees in despair.

"I cannot fight this war," he moaned.

Krishna then lectured Arjuna about duty and about the yoga of action; this was the Bhagavad-Gita. "Seek not the fruits of action," Krishna said, "but you must act, Arjuna! You are a kshatriya, and now you must fight. This is your dharma."

134. Krishna Reveals Himself to Arjuna

Krishna then revealed himself as God to Arjuna: he had mouths, eyes, faces, bodies beyond counting. He was the whole universe, birth and death without beginning or end. He was everything, stretching from earth to sky, horizon to horizon. Everywhere.

Arjuna prayed. "I see all beings, all weapons, all war, all peace, all worship, all fear. I see!"

"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds," Krishna said. "The warriors you see are already dead, slain by their own karma. You are that karma. Arise and fight, Arjuna. It is time."

Arjuna took up his bow, ready to fight.

135. Yuyutsu Chooses a Side

“Anyone fighting for the Kaurava side may come to us now!” shouted Yudhishtira before the battle began.

“And I say the same!” shouted Duryodhana. “Anyone on the Pandava side may join me now.”

Of the warriors present at Kurukshetra, only one changed sides at that time: Yuyutsu, Duryodhana’s brother. He was the son of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari’s maid.

Among Duryodhana’s other brothers, the hundred sons of Gandhari, none deserted him, although Vikarna pressed him one last time to make peace. “The Pandavas are our cousins,” he said to Duryodhana. “We should not fight them.”

But Duryodhana was eager for war.

136. The War Begins

The armies of warriors on both sides were ready to begin the great war, but then Yudhishtira stepped forward and, setting aside his armor and weapons, he walked to the Kaurava side.

“Is he surrendering already?” Duryodhana wondered. “Coward!”

But Yudhishtira was not surrendering. Instead, he saluted Drona, his guru, then his great-uncle Bhishma, and all the Kaurava elders.

His purpose accomplished, Yudhishtira returned to the Pandava side, took up his weapons and armor again, and gave the signal. “Begin!”

So the war began, and it lasted eighteen days.

Millions died, and their blood washed over Kurukshetra like a flood.

137. The Pandavas and Kauravas Clash

On the first day, Bhima and Arjuna attacked the Kaurava armies relentlessly.

“Those two will destroy us,” Duryodhana shouted, “and we don’t even have Karna to help us.”

Bhishma glared at Duryodhana. “Do you want me to die?”

“No, no,” Duryodhana stammered, “I just meant someone must stop Arjuna and Bhima!”

Bhishma then shot an arrow that struck Krishna, drawing blood, but this only served to make Arjuna fight even more fiercely.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Dhrishtadyumna chased down Drona, his father’s mortal enemy, but Drona killed his charioteer and nearly killed Dhrishtadyumna too; Bhima barely rescued him in time.

138. Arjuna Attacks Bhishma

“I see you hesitating to kill Bhishma,” Krishna said to Arjuna, “but you must not hesitate. Kill him!”

Krishna then raced the chariot towards Bhishma, and Arjuna rained arrows down upon him, while Bhishma only smiled. “Well done!” he shouted, praising his great-nephew.

“I’ll kill him myself then,” said Krishna, leaping from the chariot and raising his discus.

“O God,” Bhishma prayed, “death at your hands is salvation.”

“No!” Arjuna pulled Krishna’s arm back. “You vowed not to fight; it is for me to do.”

But Arjuna did not kill Bhishma that day, and the battle raged on and on.

139. Duryodhana Attacks with Elephants

Duryodhana attacked with elephants, but Bhima killed them all. “You elephants and you evil-minded Kauravas, meet your destroyer!” he shouted. “My mace will show you all the way to Yama’s world!”

On that day alone, Bhima killed eight of Duryodhana’s brothers. “Dhritarashtra may have sired one hundred sons,” Bhima snarled, “but I vow that I will kill them all.”

Duryodhana then landed a blow that knocked Bhima to the ground, whereupon Bhima’s rakshasa son Ghatotkacha materialized out of nowhere, rescuing his father and joining the battle.

“We can’t defeat the rakshasa!” Duryodhana shouted, retreating.

Thus ended another day of battle.

140. Barbarika Joins the War

Barbarika, a mighty warrior, was the son of Bhima and a naga princess, but he had an unexpected loyalty. "I always join the losing side," he proclaimed.

Krishna realized this shifting loyalty would prolong the war forever. "If you help the losers," Krishna said, "help me by beheading someone who threatens the whole world!"

"Show him to me!" said Barbarika.

Krishna held up a mirror.

Barbarika was true to his word. "Still, I wish I could see the war," he said as he beheaded himself.

Afterwards, Krishna breathed life into the head so Barbarika could watch the war after all.

141. Shikhandin Confronts Bhishma

On the tenth day the Pandavas realized they could use Shikhandin against Bhishma: Shikhandin had been born a woman, and Bhishma would not fight a woman. So Shikhandin rode forward and, under Arjuna's protection, began shooting at Bhishma.

"I won't fight you, Shikhandin," Bhishma shouted.

"Fight or not," Shikhandin replied, "I will slay you today. I was born for this!"

Shikhandin continued firing, and Arjuna shot Bhishma too. The old warrior's body was pierced everywhere with arrows. When he fell, he didn't touch the ground. Instead, he rested on a bed of arrows.

Both sides stopped fighting when Bhishma fell.

142. Bhishma Lies on the Bed of Arrows

Bhishma lay on the bed of arrows but did not die; he had the power to choose the moment of his death, and he chose to wait.

“I’m thirsty,” he said, and Arjuna shot an arrow into the ground. Water burst forth; thus Bhishma’s mother, Ganga, quenched his thirst.

Bhishma urged Duryodhana to seek peace with the Pandavas.

Karna was there too, and sought Bhishma’s forgiveness. Again, Bhishma urged peace. “Listen, Karna: you are Kunti’s son,” he said. “End this war with your brothers.”

But instead, Karna donned his armor, ready to fight now that Bhishma had left the battlefield.

143. Kunti Comes to Karna

The dawn before Karna joined the battle, Kunti came to see him.

“I know you are my mother,” Karna said. “Krishna told me. But my love is for the mother and father who raised me, the charioteer and his wife. And for Duryodhana, who accepted me as I am, while you rejected me.”

Kunti wept, and Karna pitied her in that moment. “I promise I will fight Arjuna only,” he said. “I will spare your other sons. That way, when this war is over, either Arjuna will be dead, or I will be, and you will still have five sons.”

144. Indra Visits Karna in Disguise

Karna had another visitor that morning: the god Indra, who was worried for his son, Arjuna. Relying on Karna's generosity, Indra went to Karna disguised as an old man, begging Karna to give him a gift.

"What do you want?" Karna asked.

"Your earrings and armor," said the old man.

Without hesitation, Karna cut off the earrings and armor that had been part of his body since birth, giving them to the old man.

Astounded by Karna's complete generosity, Indra revealed himself. "Take this divine Shakti-spear," he said. "It never misses its mark, but you can use it only once."

145. Bhima Pursues the Sons of Gandhari

Bhima had vowed he would kill the hundred sons of Gandhari. Each day, he prowled the battlefield in search of the Kaurava brothers, killing them one by one.

Then the day came when Bhima found himself face to face with Vikarna, the only one of Gandhari's sons who defied Duryodhana. Vikarna had even defended Draupadi in the gambling hall. But out of loyalty to his brothers, Vikarna was fighting on the Kaurava side.

Bhima killed Vikarna, and he wept when he did so.

Krishna, however, did not weep. "Dharma is what matters," Krishna told him. "Not family. Not friends. Dharma."

146. Duryodhana Plans to Capture Yudhishtira

Duryodhana wanted to capture Yudhishtira alive. “Make that your priority!” he told Drona, now commander-in-chief. Duryodhana hoped to compel Yudhishtira to accept an invitation to gamble again, sending the Pandavas into another exile as a way to end the war.

Drona, however, failed to capture Yudhishtira. “Under Arjuna’s watchful protection, there is no way to capture him,” Drona protested.

“The fault is yours!” Duryodhana shouted. “You favor the Pandavas, despite being my commander-in-chief.”

A band of Duryodhana’s soldiers then took the samshaptaka oath, vowing to kill Arjuna or die trying. “Victory or death!” they cried as they rode into battle.

147. Abhimanyu Enters the Maze

As Arjuna battled the suicide squadron, Drona arranged his army in a maze formation. Only Arjuna knew the counterattack.

Only Arjuna... and his son. "I learned this secret in the womb," said Abhimanyu. "I can break the maze; I just don't know how to get out."

"Don't worry!" Bhima assured him. "We'll be with you."

Abhimanyu broke through, but the Kaurava forces led by Jayadratha sealed the breach immediately, cutting Abhimanyu off from the Pandavas. He fought fiercely, even using his chariot wheel as a weapon, but the Kauravas overwhelmed him, and Abhimanyu died there, trapped inside the maze, alone.

148. Arjuna Vows to Avenge Abhimanyu

When Arjuna learned Jayadratha had led the soldiers who killed his son, he vowed revenge. “Either I kill Jayadratha before sunset tomorrow, or I kill myself.”

The Kauravas made every effort to protect Jayadratha so Arjuna would have to kill himself at sunset.

Krishna, however, intervened. As evening approached, he raised his divine discus and hid the sun from view. Thinking the sun had set, the Kauravas let down their guard, exposing Jayadratha. Krishna lowered his discus: the setting sun was still in the sky as Arjuna shot an arrow that decapitated Jayadratha.

Thus ended another day of the war.

149. Duryodhana Seeks Gandhari's Blessing

The war continued day after day after day.

Each morning, Duryodhana would go to his mother and ask for her blessing. Gandhari's pious devotion gave her enormous power, so what she said always came true.

"Mother, please say 'May my sons win,'" Duryodhana would ask her.

Gandhari, however, would only say, "May the right side win."

Dhritarashtra protested. "Whether he's right or not, Duryodhana is our son."

But Gandhari repeated, "May the right side win," and all the while she grieved for her hundred sons as Bhima killed them, one by one by one.

Soon, there would be none left.

150. Bhima Fights Karna

The next day, Bhima killed twelve more of Duryodhana's brothers. "I will kill them all," he thought to himself, "Duryodhana and all his brothers!"

Then when Bhima saw Karna, he turned his chariot to pursue him, but Karna shattered Bhima's bow, broke his mace, and killed Bhima's charioteer. Bhima then had to hide behind the carcasses of war-elephants that littered the battlefield.

"Go back into the forest where you belong!" Karna yelled.

But as he had promised Kunti, Karna did not kill Bhima. Arjuna was the only one of the Pandavas that Karna was going to fight in mortal combat.

151. King Bhagadatta Attacks Arjuna

When Arjuna saw Bhima attacked by King Bhagadatta's elephant army, he ordered Krishna to drive his chariot into the fray.

As soon as Bhagadatta saw them coming, he unleashed a terrible weapon: a Vishnu-astra. Before Arjuna could shoot an arrow in defense, Krishna leaped up and the Vishnu-astra struck him in the chest.

It turned into a garland of flowers.

Krishna then explained. "Bhagadatta received that astra from Bhudevi, the earth-goddess, and she received it from Vishnu when, in the form of the boar Varaha, I pulled her from the sea. I created that astra; only I could stop it."

152. The Rakshasas Attack

Bhima's son Ghatotkacha led his rakshasas in an assault on the Kauravas. Using their powers of illusion and supernatural weapons, the terrifying rakshasas routed the Kauravas.

"Save us, Karna!" Drona shouted. "Use the Shakti-spear to kill Ghatotkacha."

"But I can use that spear only once," Karna protested; he had planned to use it against Arjuna.

"Use it now!" Drona ordered.

So Karna launched his celestial spear at Ghatotkacha. Fatally wounded, Ghatotkacha rose in the air, expanded in size, and then hurtled down to the ground, crushing thousands of Kaurava soldiers as he fell.

Thus died Ghatotkacha, Bhima's devoted rakshasa son.

153. The Pandavas Plan Drona's Death

"We must stop Drona," Krishna advised the Pandavas. "We'll tell him that his son Ashwatthama is dead. He'll lose the will to fight, and then we will kill him."

"But who will do these terrible things?" Yudhishtira groaned. "Who will lie to Drona, and who will kill him?"

"You always tell the truth, Yudhishtira," answered Arjuna, "so you must be the one to tell Drona about Ashwatthama, and Dhrishtadyumna will kill him."

Arjuna wept as he contemplated Drona's death.

Bhima, meanwhile, grabbed his mace and felled an elephant. "That elephant was named Ashwatthama," he declared. "It's true: Ashwatthama is dead."

154. Drona Hears Word of Ashwatthama's Death

Bhima shouted, "Listen to me, Drona: I have killed Ashwatthama!"

Drona could not believe what Bhima was saying. "Yudhishtira!" Drona shouted. "You have never told a lie. Tell me truly: is Ashwatthama really dead?"

"Ashwatthama is dead!" Yudhishtira shouted, loud enough for Drona to hear him. And then he whispered, "Ashwatthama the elephant."

Drona, casting aside his weapons and armor, sank down in a trance of despair.

Drupada's son Dhrishtadyumna then raced towards Drona and cut off his head with his sword, fulfilling the purpose for which he had been born.

Ashwatthama, however, was very much alive and vowed revenge.

155. Ashwatthama Launches the Narayana-Astra

When Ashwatthama learned his father was dead, he unleashed the Narayana-astra, which spewed deadly fire across the sky.

“It will kill us all!” shouted Yudhishthira.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Krishna. “Bow down to this weapon, and it will spare you. Do not fight; be at peace.”

Bhima, however, did not listen; instead, he ran towards Ashwatthama, brandishing his mace. The astra’s fire then focused on Bhima, but Krishna and Arjuna intervened, throwing Bhima to the ground and wrenching the mace from his hand.

“This astra won’t attack an unarmed man,” Krishna explained, and as he spoke, the astra’s fire subsided.

156. Ashwatthama Makes a Vow

When Duryodhana saw that Ashwatthama's Narayana-astra had failed, he shouted, "Launch another! When they see the astra attack them a second time, they will take up their weapons and its fire will consume them."

"I cannot," said Ashwatthama sadly. "The Narayana-astra can be used only once. If I launch it again, the astra will turn back and attack us instead."

"But you must avenge your father's death!" said Duryodhana.

Ashwatthama nodded. "The Pandavas will pay," he vowed, his voice shaking with anger. "Before this war is over, I will make them pay in blood for taking my father from me."

157. Bhima Finds Dushasana

Bhima found Dushasana at last. “Do you remember my vow, cousin?” Bhima shouted, brandishing his sword.

Dushasana did remember Bhima’s vow and fled in terror, but Bhima grabbed him and pulled him to the ground.

“Is this the hand that held Draupadi by the hair? The hand that pulled off her sari?” Bhima shouted, as he tore Dushasana’s arm off and threw it across the battlefield, where it struck Duryodhana in the face.

Then Bhima bent down and drank Dushasana’s blood, fulfilling his vow.

Next, he summoned Draupadi, who washed her hair in Dushasana’s blood, just as she had vowed.

158. Karna Duels with Arjuna

The time had finally come: Karna and Arjuna were going to fight.

Karna had long waited for this moment, and so had the naga Ashwasena. When Khandava forest burned, Arjuna killed all the nagas fleeing the fire. Ashwasena alone survived, and he now turned himself into a serpent-arrow inside Karna's quiver, ready to kill Arjuna.

But when Karna fired at Arjuna's head, Krishna lowered Arjuna's chariot. The serpent-arrow knocked off Arjuna's crown; it did not hit him.

When Ashwasena begged Karna to try again, Karna refused. "I cannot use the same arrow twice. I must kill Arjuna some other way!"

159. The Duel Continues

As Karna battled with Arjuna, Shalya, Karna's charioteer, said, "I see you're feeling anxious, understandably. Arjuna is a great warrior."

"You are my charioteer!" Karna shouted angrily. "Not Arjuna's!"

But Shalya failed to offer Karna any encouragement.

The duel went on and on as Arjuna and Karna fired arrows at one another, wheeling their chariots around to face each other again and again.

Then Karna's chariot got stuck in the mud. "Get out and free the wheel!" Karna told Shalya.

But Shalya refused. "That's no task for a king like me."

So Karna leaped down to free the wheel himself.

160. Karna Forgets the Mantra

As Karna worked to free his chariot wheel, he shouted, "Arjuna! Krishna! You are honor-bound to let me fix my chariot."

"What kind of honor was it to humiliate Draupadi?" replied Krishna. "What honor was there in butchering Abhimanyu?"

Karna said nothing, still struggling to free the wheel.

Hearing Arjuna's chariot draw nearer, he decided to launch the Brahmastra. But suddenly he could not remember the mantra.

It was all just as Parashurama had foretold.

"Kill him!" Krishna shouted.

Arjuna hesitated, seeing Karna standing defenseless in the mud, but he obeyed Krishna's command.

Arjuna's arrow struck Karna and killed him.

161. Krishna Tests Karna's Generosity

As Karna lay dying in the mud, Krishna decided to test his famed generosity. Disguising himself as an old brahmin, Krishna knelt beside Karna and said, "Before you die, please give me a gift, I beg you."

Karna didn't know what he could give, but then he remembered: his two gold teeth. He pulled out the teeth and offered them to the brahmin.

"You are indeed the most generous man of this age," the brahmin said, and then Krishna manifested his divine form.

"Thank you, Lord," said Karna as he closed his eyes.

That was the last sight Karna saw.

162. Yudhishtira Confronts Shalya

After Karna's death, Duryodhana appointed King Shalya as supreme commander.

"Only you can kill Shalya," Krishna told Yudhishtira. "Inside him is a demon that feeds on aggression, which means the only way to defeat him is to confront him with love and respect. You alone are capable of this."

So Yudhishtira confronted Shalya on the battlefield with love in his heart, not hatred or anger, thus rendering Shalya's demon powerless. Doing his duty, Yudhishtira then killed Shalya with a single spear-thrust. "Forgive me," he said, weeping, for Shalya was the brother of Madri, uncle to his brothers Nakula and Sahadeva.

163. Duryodhana Despairs

“Shalya is dead!” Ashwatthama told Duryodhana. “Yudhishtira killed him. Let me be your commander now. I can still destroy the Pandavas!”

“But there is no army left to command,” groaned Duryodhana.

Meanwhile, Sahadeva and Nakula were battling the last of the Gandharan soldiers. Sahadeva had killed Uluka, Shakuni’s son, and Shakuni then attacked Sahadeva, shattering Sahadeva’s chariot. Sahadeva leaped to the ground, grabbed an axe, and smashed it into Shakuni’s skull as he shouted, “Draupadi is avenged at last!”

When Duryodhana learned that his uncle Shakuni was dead, he ran away in despair.

He could see the war was lost.

THE WAR'S AFTERMATH



164. Duryodhana Hides in the Lake

Of Gandhari's hundred sons, only Duryodhana was left. He used a mantra to disappear under the waters of a lake, but Yudhishtira detected him.

"You can't hide, Duryodhana!" he shouted.

"I'm not hiding," Duryodhana replied. "I'm cooling my inner fire. The world is yours now: take it all, everything! You have won!"

"Very generous!" replied Yudhishtira. "But earlier, you would not give us our half of the kingdom, nor five villages, nor even a needlepoint of land."

Duryodhana emerged from the water, wielding his mace. "I'm still here, and I will fight you all," he shouted angrily, "one by one."

165. Duryodhana Duels with Bhima

“Did you fight Abhimanyu one by one?” Yudhishtira said to Duryodhana. “No, you attacked like a pack of wolves. But we respect dharma. We agree to single combat. If you die, you’ll have heaven; if you live, you’ll have your kingdom.”

Duryodhana challenged Bhima first, and they fought. As he had vowed, Bhima smashed Duryodhana’s thigh and then danced in joy around his fallen victim.

“Enough!” said Yudhishtira. “He’s still our cousin, and a prince.”

“But he’ll die soon,” said Krishna. “It’s time to go.”

“I shall attain heaven,” groaned Duryodhana. “Take the earth, if that is what you want.”

166. Duryodhana Summons Balarama

Balarama had refused to choose a side in the war. He had taught Duryodhana and Bhima the art of mace-fighting, and he loved them both. So when Bhima shattered Duryodhana's thigh with his mace, Duryodhana cried out, "That's against all the rules! Balarama, my guru, see what Bhima has done to me! To me, who was always your favorite!"

Instantly, Balarama appeared and lifted up his plow to kill Bhima, but Krishna intervened. "Stop, my brother!" he said. "Bhima has only fulfilled the vow he took when Duryodhana taunted Draupadi by slapping his thigh. All is as it must be."

167. Duryodhana Addresses His Son

As Duryodhana lay dying on the battlefield, they brought his young son, Durjaya, to see him. The little boy ran to his father and went to sit on his lap, but his father had to push him away.

“The Pandavas have broken my thigh,” he said to Durjaya. He then caressed the boy’s hair and said, “They are the victors, my son, my Durjaya. You must serve them now, the Pandavas; they are your uncles. I commend you to their protection because I am leaving soon. Very soon.”

And Duryodhana wept as he thought of all he would leave behind.

168. Draupadi Greet the Victorious Pandavas

The war had lasted eighteen days when the Pandavas declared victory over the Kauravas. Draupadi greeted her husbands as they returned from the battlefield, draping them with garlands of triumph: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva.

“Come, Krishna!” Draupadi said, turning to Krishna who was still standing on Arjuna’s chariot. “I made a garland for you too!”

Krishna smiled; then, as he dismounted, the chariot burst into flames.

“Drona had actually destroyed the chariot days ago with a fire-missile,” he explained.

Thus the Pandavas realized that their victory was all thanks to Krishna: his power had saved them again and again.

169. Barbarika Settles an Argument

After the war was over, soldiers in the Pandava camp began arguing about who had won the most glory. “Arjuna!” said some. “No, Bhima!” said others. Finally, as the argument grew more heated, Krishna said, “Let’s ask the head.”

He meant the head of Barbarika, who had watched the whole war.

They gathered around the head, repeating the claims for the various warriors.

“Arjuna? Bhima?” said the head in surprise. “I saw no warrior but Krishna. Everywhere his Sudarshana-Chakra flew through the air, cutting the unrighteous to pieces, and their blood spilled upon the earth like the tongue of Kali.”

170. Ashwatthama Makes a Final Vow

Over a billion soldiers died in the war.

On the Pandava side, a few thousand survived.

On the Kaurava side, there were three survivors: Drona's son, Ashwatthama; Ashwatthama's uncle, Kripa; and Kritavarma, a Yadava commander, plus Duryodhana, who lay dying beside the lake where the Pandavas had left him.

The three survivors knelt beside Duryodhana, and they listened to the sounds of rejoicing in the Pandava camp.

Ashwatthama still refused to admit defeat. "I will kill the Pandavas yet!" he vowed.

Duryodhana nodded, unable to resist the force of Ashwatthama's rage. "Do it," he said. "Kill them if you can."

171. The Kauravas Raid the Camp by Night

“We are only three,” said Kripa.

“What can we do?” asked Kritavarma.

Then they saw a single owl kill a flock of crows sleeping in a tree.

“We can do that!” said Ashwatthama. “We’ll sneak in and kill them as they sleep.”

Ashwatthama found Draupadi’s brothers, Shikhandin and Dhrishtadyumna, and killed them both. “That is for Bhishma,” he whispered, “and for my father!”

Next, Ashwatthama beheaded five warriors sleeping together, thinking they were the Pandavas, and put their heads into a sack. Finally, he set fire to the camp, while Kripa and Kritavarma shot down soldiers who fled the fire.

172. Ashwatthama Returns to Duryodhana

Ashwatthama returned to Duryodhana, proudly carrying the bag of five heads.

“I killed the Pandavas!” he said.

“Show me,” Duryodhana said in disbelief. “Give me Bhima’s head.”

Ashwatthama gave him a head, and Duryodhana took it and crushed it between his fingers.

“No!” said Duryodhana. “This is not Bhima; I would not be able to crush his head so easily. Who have you killed?”

Then Ashwatthama realized: he had killed the five sons of Draupadi. These were not the Pandavas.

“I have lost the war,” Duryodhana sighed, “but the Pandavas... they too lost everything.”

And with those words, he died.

173. The One Hundred Kauravas

Duryodhana, Dushasana, Duhsaha, Duhsala, Jalasandha, Sama, Saha, Vinda, Anuvinda, Durdharsha.

Suvahu, Dushpradharshana, Durmarshana, Durmukha, Dushkarna, Vivinsati, Vikarna, Sala, Satva, Sulochana.

Chitra, Upachitra, Chitraksha, Charuchitra, Sarasana, Durmada, Durvigaha, Vivitsu, Vikatanana, Urnanabha.

Sunabha, Nandaka, Upanandaka, Chitravana, Chitravarman, Suvarman, Durvimochana, Ayovahu, Mahavahu, Chitranga.

Chitrakundala, Bhimavega, Bhimavala, Balaki, Balavardhana, Ugrayudha, Bhima, Karna, Kanakaya, Dridhayudha.

Dridhavarman, Dridhakshatra, Somakitri, Anudara, Dridhasandha, Jarasandha, Satyasandha, Sada, Suvak, Ugrasravas.

Ugrasena, Senani, Dushparajaya, Aparajita, Kundasayin, Visalaksha, Duradhara, Dridhahasta, Suhasta, Vatavega.

Suvarchas, Adityaketu, Vahvashin, Nagadatta, Agrayayin, Kavachin, Krathana, Kunda, Kundadhara, Dhanurdhara.

Ugra, Bhimaratha, Viravahu, Alolupa, Abhaya, Raudrakarman, Dridharatha, Anadhrishya, Kundabhedhin, Viravi.

Dhirghalochana, Pramatha, Pramathi, Dhirgharoma, Dirghavahu, Mahabahu, Vyudhoru, Kanakadhvaja, Kundasi, Virajas.

174. Krishna Curses Ashwatthama

Only seven warriors survived Ashwatthama's raid on the camp: the five Pandavas themselves, plus two Yadavas, Krishna and Satyaki.

Draupadi wailed over the bodies of her sons, beheaded in the night. Her brother Dhrishtadyumna's charioteer had seen it all. "Ashwatthama did this," he said. "He beheaded the boys."

"I want Ashwatthama's head as vengeance!" Draupadi moaned.

"No," said Krishna. "The killing is over. Capture him alive, and we will subject him to a punishment worse than death. I curse Ashwatthama to live forever, driven from civilization and shunned by all humanity."

Thus Ashwatthama became one of the Chiranjivi, the immortals.

175. Kunti Searches the Battlefield

The Pandavas then saw their mother Kunti walking slowly across the battlefield, bending down to look at the faces of the fallen Kaurava soldiers. "Mother!" they shouted. "What are you doing? Those are the Kauravas."

"I am looking for your brother," she said.

They stared at her in confusion.

"I am looking for Karna, my first-born son."

At her words, Arjuna felt faint. "You mean I killed my own brother?" he gasped.

"And did Karna know this?" Yudhishtira asked.

"Yes," said Kunti sadly. "He knew, and he promised I would see five sons survive the war. He kept his promise."

176. The Pandavas Honor Karna

The Pandavas were stunned when Kunti told them the story of Karna's birth.

Yudhishtira, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva now realized why Karna had spared them on the battlefield; that had been his promise to Kunti.

Arjuna remembered the years he had spent hating Karna, when he should have loved him instead as a brother.

"Why did you not tell us?" Arjuna asked Kunti.

Krishna answered for her. "If she told you, you would not have fought," he said. "But you had to fight. It was dharma. All is as it must be."

Then they honored Karna with a hero's funeral.

177. Gandhari Searches the Battlefield

Gandhari spent the night on the battlefield, stumbling among corpses, seeking her sons.

But suddenly, she felt hungry.

So very hungry.

Smelling a mango, she jumped and grabbed, but the mango was out of a reach. Then she made a pile of stones to reach the mango.

It was delicious!

As she ate, she realized these were not stones.

They were skulls.

She had been standing on the skulls of her sons to reach the fruit.

“All we see is maya, the illusion of the world!” she groaned. “Blindfold or no blindfold, we are all maya’s fools.”

Then Gandhari wept.

178. The Pandavas Return to Hastinapura

Having won the war, the Pandavas returned to Hastinapura to claim the kingdom.

Dhritarashtra greeted them. “Where is Bhima?” the blind king asked. “I wish to embrace him.”

But Krishna had foreseen this moment and warned the Pandavas to give Dhritarashtra an iron statue of Bhima to embrace instead.

With the power of his grief, Dhritarashtra crushed the statue. Then, realizing what he had done, he burst into tears. “Oh Bhima, my nephew, what have I done?”

“That was only a statue of Bhima,” Krishna said reassuringly. “You have had your revenge.”

Dhritarashtra wept with gratitude and embraced Bhima warmly.

179. Gandhari Curses Krishna

Gandhari, however, was inconsolable. “Are you happy now, Krishna?” she said. “Your tricks killed all my sons.”

“Not so,” Krishna replied. “Their karma killed them: the consequences of their actions and the wicked choices that they made. But in death they are transformed; you should rejoice that they are in heaven.”

“Your words mean nothing,” shouted Gandhari, “and your actions also have consequences. Hear my curse: all the people of your tribe will destroy one another, and you will be left to die alone.”

Krishna said nothing, as he already knew of these events to come.

All actions have consequences.

180. The Pandavas Mourn the Dead

Mourning the dead, the survivors went to the banks of the sacred river. The Pandavas were there, along with Dhritarashtra and Vidura, and all the women: Gandhari and Kunti, and all the wives, the widows, all the mothers and sisters and daughters.

The rishi Narada joined in the mourning.

“Do you rejoice in your victory?” he asked Yudhishtira.

“I see only death,” Yudhishtira replied. “I see only defeat. Worst of all, I have learned that Karna was Kunti’s son. Karna knew, and said nothing. My elder brother is dead now, and I rule a kingdom that should have been his.”

THE PANDAVA KINGS



181. Yudhishtira Becomes King of Hastinapura

After the war, Yudhishtira decided to renounce the world. “I will live in the forest, eating only roots and fruits. I will make no judgments. I will issue no commands.”

But his brothers and Draupadi protested, insisting that he must become king.

“Stop indulging yourself and your feelings,” Krishna told him. “You will become king; it is your dharma.”

So Yudhishtira was crowned king, as Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva stood beside him, along with their wife Draupadi and their mother Kunti.

He appointed Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra’s only surviving son, to care for the old king and attend to his needs.

182. Bhishma Instructs Yudhishtira

The mighty Kaurava generals were all dead... except one: Bhishma. Fatally wounded, he was still alive, lying on the bed made by the arrows that pierced his body.

Bhishma had the power to choose when to die, and he was waiting until after the winter solstice: he wanted to die on the first day of Uttarayana, when Surya turns north.

Bhishma thus waited fifty-eight days, the days growing ever shorter.

Yudhishtira came, and Bhishma instructed him in the ways of kingship, telling him stories of long ago.

Bhishma also taught Yudhishtira to chant the Sahasra-Nama, the Thousand Names of God.

183. Bhishma Departs This World

The Pandavas gathered around Bhishma on his bed of arrows, waiting for the moment when he would choose to die.

They had known this old warrior all their lives, and he had been like a father to them: Bhishma, the son of Shantanu and of the goddess Ganga. Bhishma, who had no sons of his own.

They waited with him.

They wept.

Finally, he breathed his last.

Yudhishtira lifted Bhishma up off the bed of arrows and cremated his body on the bank of the Ganges. The goddess then arose from the river and escorted her son's soul into heaven.

184. Dhritarashtra Stays in the Palace

Dhritarashtra continued to live in the palace, advising his nephew Yudhishtira, who was now king.

Bhima, however, didn't make it easy. When the family ate together, Bhima would crack his knuckles and reminisce about killing the Kauravas one after another. Whenever anybody broke open a bone to eat the marrow, Bhima would shout, "That reminds me of the sound Duryodhana's thigh made when I smashed it!"

Dhritarashtra's brother Vidura urged him to renounce the world. "Brother," he said, "It's time to go live in the forest!"

Dhritarashtra wanted to go, but he was attached to the luxuries of palace life.

185. The Elders Go into the Forest

Eventually, Dhritarashtra left Hastinapura, together with Kunti and Gandhari. They lived in the forest.

One day there came a forest fire.

Even then, Gandhari didn't remove her blindfold. She had removed her blindfold only once, attempting to use the power of her gaze to make Duryodhana invincible. "Come to me naked," she told him. Duryodhana, however, was embarrassed and wore a loincloth. All that Gandhari saw became invincible, but Duryodhana was still vulnerable.

She had not been able to save him, and she had no wish to save herself.

"Run!" Dhritarashtra shouted.

"Why?" replied Gandhari.

They died in the fire.

186. The Yadavas Quarrel

Time passed.

Then, a fight began in Dwaraka: some Yadavas defended the Pandavas, while others defended the Kauravas.

“The Kauravas ambushed Abhimanyu!” shouted the Pandava allies.

“The Pandavas deceived Drona!” retorted the Kaurava allies.

Back and forth they argued.

Fearing violence, Krishna and Balarama hid every weapon, but the quarreling citizens of Dwaraka then grabbed reeds from the seashore. These were no ordinary reeds: their edges were as sharp as any iron weapon.

Thus the Yadavas destroyed themselves.

Satyaki and Kritavarma, who had both survived the war, killed one another in that fight.

Such was the power of Gandhari’s curse.

187. The Story of the Reeds

Long ago, Krishna's son Samba wanted to trick the forest rishis, so he dressed up as a pregnant woman. "Is my baby male or female?" he asked.

The angry rishis replied, "You bear no baby but an iron bar that will destroy the Yadavas."

Samba tried to laugh it off, but an iron bar eventually emerged from his thigh. Horrified, Samba ground the bar into dust which he threw into the sea.

The sea cast the iron dust back onto the shore, and it grew into the reeds with which the Yadavas destroyed themselves years later, arguing about the war.

188. Balarama and Krishna Depart the World

After the Yadavas slaughtered one another, Balarama resolved to leave the world. As he meditated, his life-force emerged in the form of a white snake, which then vanished.

After Balarama departed, Krishna too was ready for his life to end. He went into the forest, sat under a banyan tree, and waited.

A hunter named Jara, mistaking Krishna's foot for the ear of a deer, shot Krishna with an arrow.

Jara had found the arrowhead in the belly of a fish, and it was made of the same accursed iron which had killed the Yadavas.

Gandhari's curse was now fulfilled.

189. Krishna Tells Jara a Story

Before Krishna died, he revealed to Jara the truth of his birth. “We met before, during the Treta Yuga: you were born as Vali, king of the monkeys of Kishkindha, and I was born as Rama, prince of Ayodhya. Because of a promise I made to your brother Sugriva, I shot you with an arrow from an ambush, just as you shot me now. All is as it must be.”

Krishna then left his body and returned to Vaikuntha, his heavenly abode.

Thus the Dvapara Yuga ended, and the Kali Yuga began, the final era in the cycle of time.

190. The Pandavas Depart

The sons of the Pandavas died in the war, but one grandson survived: Parikshit, the son of Uttara and Abhimanyu, who was the son of Arjuna and Krishna's sister Subhadra. Ashwatthama had launched a weapon to kill Parkishit while still in his mother's womb, but Krishna saved him, and Parikshit later became king in Hastinapura.

Then, after Parikshit's coronation, Yudhishtira, his brothers, and Draupadi resolved to climb Mount Meru, seeking heaven. After the loss of Krishna and Balarama, they no longer had any desire to remain in this world.

Dressed in clothes of bark, they departed on their final journey.

191. The Pandavas Climb Mount Meru

As the Pandavas and Draupadi climbed the snowy slopes of Mount Meru, seeking to attain heaven, Draupadi was the first to fall, but the Pandavas did not stop walking.

Then Sahadeva fell, and Nakula. No one stopped.

Arjuna. Then Bhima.

Alone, Yudhishtira kept on walking up the mountain.

As he walked, he reflected on the flaws that made them fall.

Draupadi had not loved all her husbands equally; she preferred Arjuna.

Sahadeva was proud of his knowledge, and Nakula of his beauty.

Arjuna had been envious, and Bhima gluttonous.

And so Yudhishtira kept walking, wondering if he too would fall.

192. Yudhishtira Must Choose

At last, Yudhishtira came to Amravati's gate, where the devas greeted him. "Welcome, Yudhishtira! You may enter heaven's gate, but not your dog."

"What dog?" asked Yudhishtira, surprised. Then he turned and saw a dog who had followed him all the way from Hastinapura.

"The dog made the ascent," Yudhishtira protested. "His devotion is perfect! He too should enter heaven."

"No," said the gods. "You must come alone."

"If so," replied Yudhishtira, "I won't come."

Next, the dog vanished. Yama, god of dharma, appeared; Yudhishtira's father was testing him. "You have done well," he said, and Yudhishtira then entered Amravati.

193. Yudhishtira Finds the Kauravas in Heaven

As Yudhishtira entered Amravati, he saw the Kauravas mingling with the gods. Duryodhana was there, and Dushasana, happy and radiant in the light of heaven. They smiled when they saw Yudhishtira. "Welcome, cousin!" Duryodhana said.

"How can this be?" Yudhishtira cried in dismay.

"Duryodhana, Dushasana, all the Kauravas died in battle on the sacred land of Kurukshetra," said the gods. "All warriors who fall on that field ascend to Amravati."

"But where are my brothers?" cried Yudhishtira. "Where is my wife?"

"They are in Naraka," said the gods.

"I must go there!" said Yudhishtira.

So Yudhishtira then descended into hell.

194. Yudhishthira Descends to Naraka

In the darkness, Yudhishthira heard shrieks and groans. He recognized his brothers' voices. "Help us, Yudhishthira!"

And then he heard Draupadi. "Husband, help me!"

"Are you ready to return to Amravati now?" the gods asked Yudhishthira.

"Don't leave us!" his brothers cried.

"Stay with me!" Draupadi begged.

"I must remain here," said Yudhishthira, angry and confused.

Then he had a vision of God. He saw the Allness of God: everything, every being, all life, all possibilities. The killers and the killed, creation and destruction. Everything.

Enlightened, Yudhishthira ascended to the highest heaven, beyond Amravati. He entered Vaikuntha, God's own home.

195. Parikshit Is Cursed

King Parikshit had a son: Janamejaya.

One day when King Parikshit returned from hunting, Janamejaya saw he was dismayed. "Father, what troubles you?" he asked.

"I am cursed to die within seven days of snakebite," Parikshit replied. "In the forest, I entered a rishi's house. I greeted him, but he said nothing. That made me angry, so I draped a dead snake over his shoulders. The rishi's son saw me do this and cursed me."

"No!" Janamejaya said. "We will protect you."

They locked the king high in a tall tower. No snake could reach him, or so they thought.

196. Parikshit Hides in the Tower

King Parikshit climbed the tower and shut himself in the highest room. Guards stood around the tower and at every door. They searched everything and everyone, making sure no snake could find its way inside.

As the seventh day drew to a close, King Parikshit finally relaxed. He enjoyed his evening meal. Then, for dessert, he bit into a fruit.

There was a worm in the fruit.

The worm transformed into Takshaka, a mighty naga.

Takshaka then plunged his fangs into the king's flesh, and seconds later the king was dead.

He didn't even have time to call for help.

197. Janamejaya Conducts a Snake Sacrifice

Janamejaya was grief-stricken at his father's death. "The snakes will pay for this!" he shouted. "I'll kill them all!"

He convened the brahmin priests of Hastinapura and ordered them to conduct a Sarpa Satra sacrifice which would kill all the snakes of the earth. The priests built a huge bonfire, and they chanted the words that summoned the snakes. Swarms of serpents came slithering across the ground and flying through the air, plunging themselves into the fire where they burned to death in their thousands and millions.

Then a stranger appeared. "Stop!" the young man shouted. "This sacrifice must stop!"

198. Astika Confronts Janamejaya

“Who dares interrupt my sacrifice?” shouted Janamejaya.

“I am Astika,” the young man replied. “My father is a rishi, and my mother is a naga. I see both sides, human and snake. For the sake of both humans and snakes, stop this sacrifice! Takshaka sought revenge for your great-grandfather Arjuna burning Khandava forest, which was home to many nagas. Now you seek revenge for your father. Then there will be snakes seeking revenge against you for this sacrifice. The revenge must stop. We need peace, not fire. Not winners and losers. The world needs dharma.”

“Tell me more,” said Janamejaya.

199. Janamejaya Hears the Mahabharata Story

Astika spoke to Janamejaya about King Kuru and his ancestors, about the Pandavas and Kauravas, and about the war they fought.

“God himself was there,” Astika said.

Janamejaya did not understand. “How could God be there?”

“God took the form of Krishna,” said Astika. “Bring the rishi Vaishampayana here, and he will tell you everything. Vaishampayana heard the story from Vyasa. Vyasa was part of the story himself, and he was also an author of the story, the Mahabharata.”

So Janamejaya summoned Vaishampayana, who recited the Mahabharata as he heard it from Vyasa, and Janamejaya became enlightened. He knew dharma.

200. You Reach the End

Vyasa first recited his Mahabharata to Ganesha. He also recited it to his disciples, including Vaishampayana, who repeated what he heard to Janamejaya.

Jaimini, another disciple of Vyasa, wrote his Mahabharata after meeting some birds who were present at Kurukshetra. An arrow had struck their mother flying overhead, and her eggs landed on the blood-soaked ground. Then a war-elephant's bell fell, covering the eggs and protecting them. The birds hatched and heard the war from inside the bell.

Alas, most of Jaimini's Mahabharata is lost, but there are more Mahabharatas.

Many Mahabharatas.

Now you've reached the end of this one.

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Glossary of Characters and Terms

Abhimanyu. son of Arjuna and Subhadra; husband of Uttarai; father of Parikshit.

Agni. fire-god.

Airavata. elephant vehicle of the god Indra.

Amba. daughter of the king of Kashi; later reincarnated as Shikhandin.

Ambalika. daughter of the king of Kashi; wife of Vichitravirya; mother of Pandu.

Ambika. daughter of the king of Kashi; wife of Vichitravirya; mother of Dhritarashtra.

Amravati. region of heaven associated with music, dancing, and other pleasures.

Anga. ancient kingdom in eastern India.

Angaraparna. gandharva whom the Pandavas encountered in their exile.

apsaras. celestial beings of great beauty associated with music and dancing.

Arjuna. one of the five Pandava brothers; son of Kunti and the storm-god Indra.

ashrams. hermitages; the secluded homes of holy people.

Ashwapati. king of Madra; father of Savitri.

Ashwasena. naga; son of Takshaka, king of the nagas.

Ashwatthama. son of Drona.

Ashwins. twin gods of healing and of the dawn; divine fathers of Nakula and Sahadeva.

Astika. son of a rishi and a naga-woman.

astras. celestial weapons imbued with the powers of gods or natural forces.

asuras. supernatural beings of great power, often opposed to devas or humans.

avatar. earthly incarnation (“descent”) of a god or goddess.

Ayodhya. capital of the kingdom of Kosala; home of Rama.

Baka. asura who tormented the village of Ekachakra.

Balarama. elder brother of Krishna; he used both a mace and a plow as weapons.

Barbarika. son of Bhima and a naga-woman.

Bhagadatta. king who fought on the Kaurava side in the Kurukshetra War.

Bhagavad-Gita. God-Song that Krishna recited to Arjuna before the battle of Kurukshetra.

Bharadwaja. rishi; father of Drona; guru to the young Drupada.

Bhima. one of the five Pandava brothers; son of Kunti and the wind-god Vayu.

Bhishma. son of Shantanu and the goddess Ganga; great-uncle to the Pandavas.

Bhudevi. goddess of the earth.

Brahma. god of creation; one of the supreme divinities with Vishnu and Shiva.

Brahmastra. Brahma-weapon; celestial weapon able to destroy the world.

brahmins. members of the priestly class.

Brihannala. identity used by Arjuna when disguised as a dance-teacher in Virata’s court.

Chedi. Indian kingdom to the south of the Yamuna river.

Chiranjivi. “Immortals” who will live until the end of the world-cycle.

Chitrangada. son of Shantanu and Satyawati; elder brother of Vichitravirya.

Chitrangada. gandharva with the same name as the son of Shantanu and Satyawati.

Damayanti. princess who married King Nala.

Dasharatha. king of Ayodhya; father of Rama whose story is told in the Ramayana.

devas. divine beings, gods.

Devavrata. birth name of Bhishma, son of Shantanu and the goddess Ganga.

dharma. that which is right and true; duty; justice.

Dhrishtadyumna. fire-born son of Drupada; brother of Draupadi.

Dhritarashtra. blind son of Vyasa and Ambika; husband of Gandhari.

Draupadi. fire-born daughter of Drupada; wife of the five Pandavas.

Drona. son of Bharadwaja; guru to the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Drupada. king of Panchala; father of Draupadi, Dhrishtadyumna, and Shikhandin.

Duhshala. daughter of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra; wife of Jayadratha.

Durjaya. son of Duryodhana; his story is told in Bhasa’s play Urubhangam.

Durvasa. rishi notorious for his bad temper.

Duryodhana. eldest son of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari; leader of the Kaurava armies.

Dushasana. son of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari; younger brother of Duryodhana.

Dvapara Yuga. third age of the world; following the Treta Yuga, preceding the Kali Yuga.

Dwaraka. ancient city on the western coast of India; home to Krishna.

Ekachakra. village in western India visited by the Pandavas.

Ekalavya. forest-dweller who sought to study archery under Drona.

Gandhara. kingdom in northern India.

Gandhari. wife of Dhritarashtra; mother of one hundred sons, including Duryodhana.

gandharvas. celestial musicians who are also messengers between gods and humans.

Gandiva. bow of Arjuna made by the god Brahma.

Ganesha. elephant-headed god; he wrote the Mahabharata as Vyasa dictated.

Ganga. goddess of the river Ganga; wife of Shantanu; mother of Bhishma.

Ganges. sacred river brought to earth by the goddess Ganga.

Ghatotkacha. rakshasa; son of Bhima and Hidimbi.

Granthika. identity used by Nakula when disguised as a horse-trainer in Virata's court.

guru. teacher, guide, expert.

Hanuman. monkey-son of Vayu, god of the wind; loyal follower of Rama.

Hastinapura. capital city of the Kuru Kingdom.

Hidimba. rakshasa; brother of Hidimbi.

Hidimbi. rakshasi; wife of Bhima; mother of Ghatotkacha.

Hiranyavarna. king of Dasharna; his daughter was betrothed to Shikhandin.

Indra. god of storms and the sky; divine father of Arjuna.

Indraloka. Indra's-Place; region of heaven (Svarga) that is

also called Amravati.

Indraprastha. capital city of the kingdom of the Pandavas.

Iraavan. son of Arjuna and Ulupi.

Jaimini. disciple of Vyasa; a version of the Mahabharata is attributed to him.

Janamejaya. king of Hastinapura; son of Parikshit.

Jara. hunter who shot Krishna.

jaya. Sanskrit word meaning "victory."

Jayadratha. king of Sindhu; husband of Duhshala.

Kali. goddess; manifestation of Shakti, divine energy.

Kali Yuga. fourth (and worst) age of the world; follows the Dvapara Yuga.

Kalpataru. wish-fulfilling tree in Amravati.

Kanka. identity used by Yudhishtira when disguised as a brahmin in Virata's court.

karma. action; chain of action and consequence.

Karna. son of Kunti and the sun-god Surya.

Kashi. ancient kingdom of India with its capital at Varanasi (Benares).

Kashya. king of Kashi; father of Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika.

Kauravas. descendants of Kuru; more specifically, Duryodhana and his brothers.

Khandava-prastha. forest wilderness given to the Pandavas as their kingdom.

Kichaka. general of the armies of King Virata; brother of Queen Sudeshna.

Kindama. rishi of the forest who was able to take the form of a deer.

Kishkindha. legendary kingdom of the monkeys (vanaras) in the epic Ramayana.

Kripa. adopted son of King Shantanu; brother-in-law of Drona; Ashwatthama's uncle.

Krishna. eighth avatar of the god Vishnu; brother of Balarama and of Subhadra.

Kritavarma. Yadava warrior who fought for the Kauravas during the war.

kshatriyas. warriors; one of the four ancient Indian social classes.

Kubera. Lord of Wealth; chief of the yakshas.

Kunti. wife of Pandu; mother of Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna, and also Karna.

Kuru. ancient ancestor of both Dhritarashtra and Pandu.

Kurukshetra. "Kuru-Field" where the armies of the Kauravas and Pandavas fought.

Lakshmana. brother of Rama who accompanied him in exile; his story is told in the Ramayana.

Madra. ancient kingdom located in north-west India.

Madri. wife of Pandu; mother of Nakula and Sahadeva; sister of Shalya.

Mahabharata. one of two main epics of ancient India (the other being the Ramayana).

Mahabhissha. king who ascended to Indra's heaven; he was reborn as King Shantanu.

Maitreya. wandering rishi who visited the Pandavas in the forest.

Mandavya. rishi wrongly accused of a crime who curses Yama.

mantra. sacred words or sounds used in meditation and also used to control astras (weapons).

Matsya. ancient kingdom of northern India.

Matsyagandha. Fish-Smell; a nickname given to Satyawati when she was young.

Mayasura. asura; he built a palace for the Pandavas at Indraprastha.

Meru. sacred mountain at the center of the world.

Mohini. female avatar of the god Vishnu; as Mohini, Krishna married Iravan.

Moudgalya. rishi; husband of Nalayani, who was Draupadi in a previous lifetime.

nagas. divine snake-beings with supernatural powers.

Nahusha. king who took Indra's place as king of heaven and then lost that place.

Nakula. one of the five Pandava brothers; twin of Sahadeva; son of Madri and the Ashwins.

Nala. king who lost his kingdom in a gambling match; husband of Damayanti.

Nalayani. wife of Moudgalya; Draupadi in a previous lifetime.

Narada. a divine rishi who likes to tell stories, share wisdom, and sometimes stir up trouble.

Naraka. a place in the afterlife for the expiation of wrongdoing before rebirth.

Narayana-astra. a celestial weapon with the power of Narayana (Vishnu).

Pandavas. sons of Pandu: Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva.

Pandu. pale son of Vyasa and Ambalika; husband of Kunti and Madri.

Parashara. rishi; father of Satyavati's son, Vyasa.

Parashurama. Axe-Rama; brahmin-warrior regarded as the sixth avatar of Vishnu.

Parikshit. son of Abhimanyu and Uttarai; father of Janamejaya.

Pashupata. powerful astra (weapon) which Arjuna received from Shiva.

Prabhasa. one of the Vasus, incarnated as Bhishma.

Prativindhya. son of Yudhishtira and Draupadi; eldest of the Upapandavas.

Purochana. Duryodhana's agent in Varanavati.

Pururavas. ancient ancestor of the Kurus and Pandavas; husband of the apsara Urvashi.

rakshasas. shape-shifting supernatural beings, often hostile to both gods and humans.

Rama. hero of the epic Ramayana; considered to be the seventh avatar of Vishnu.

Ravana. king of the rakshasas; enemy of Rama; his story is told in the Ramayana.

rishis. enlightened persons, sages.

Sahadeva. one of the five Pandava brothers; twin of Nakula; son of Madri and the Ashwins.

Sahasranama. "Thousand-Names" recitation of the thousand names of a deity.

Sairandhri. identity used by Draupadi disguised as a servant in Virata's court.

Samanta Panchaka. five lakes created by the blood of kshatriyas killed by Parashurama.

Samba. son of Krishna.

samshaptaka. oath sworn by warriors to be victorious or die in battle.

Sanjaya. charioteer and adviser to King Dhritarashtra.

Saptarishis. Seven Rishis (Seven Sages).

sari. a cloth drape worn as women's clothing.

Sarpa Satra. serpent sacrifice intended to kill all the snakes of the earth.

Satyaki. Yadava warrior; he fought for the Pandavas during the war.

Satyavan. son of a king who lost his kingdom; husband of Savitri.

Satyavati. wife of Shantanu; mother of Chitrangada, Vichitravirya, and also of Vyasa.

Savitri. princess of Madra; she chose Satyavan to be her

husband.

Shachi. consort of the god Indra.

Shakti-spear. weapon given by Indra to Karna, powered by Shakti.

Shakuni. brother of Gandhari; maternal uncle of Duryodhana.

Shalva. lover of Amba; king of Shalva, a kingdom in western India.

Shalya. king of Madra; brother of Madri; uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva.

Shantanu. king of Hastinapura; husband of Ganga and of Satyawati; father of Bhishma.

Shatanika. son of Nakula and Draupadi.

Shesha-Naga. cosmic naga on whom Vishnu rests; Balarama is his avatar.

Shikhandin. son of King Drupada; born as Drupada's daughter, he was Amba reborn.

Shikhandini. daughter born to King Drupada; later a man, Shikhandin.

Shishupala. king of Chedi; cousin of Krishna.

Shiva. god of destruction; one of the supreme divinities with Brahma and Vishnu.

Shrutakarma. son of Arjuna and Draupadi; youngest of the Upapandavas.

Shrutasena. son of Sahadeva and Draupadi.

Shurasena. Yadava ruler; father of Kunti and Vasudeva, Krishna's father.

Sindhu. kingdom of northern India on the Sindhu (Indus) river.

Sita. princess of Mithila who married Rama; her story is told in the Ramayana.

Sthuna. yaksha who exchanged gender with Shikhandini; he became Sthuni.

Sthuni. yakshini; formerly the yaksha Sthuna.

Subala. king of Gandhara; father of Gandhari and Shakuni.

Subhadra. sister of Krishna; wife of Arjuna; mother of Abhimanyu.

Sudarshana-Chakra. supernatural discus used as a weapon by Krishna and Vishnu.

Sudeshna. wife of Virata; mother of Uttara and Uttarai.

Sughada. mother of Yuyutsu; maid of Gandhari.

Sugriva. brother of Vali; king of the monkeys of Kishkindha; ally of Rama.

Sunda. asura; brother of Upasunda; lover of the apsara Tilottama.

sura. alcoholic beverage.

Surya. sun-god; father of Karna.

Susharman. king of Trigarta; ally of Duryodhana.

Sutasoma. son of Bhima and Draupadi.

swayamvara. ceremony in which a woman chooses her groom from competing suitors.

Takshaka. king of the nagas; he killed King Parikshit.

Tantipala. identity used by Sahadeva disguised as a cowherd in Virata's court.

Tilottama. apsara created by Brahma to entrap Sunda and Upasunda.

Treta Yuga. second age of the world; following the Satya Yuga, preceding the Treta Yuga.

Trigarta. ancient kingdom in northern India.

Uluka. son of Shakuni; Ghandaran warrior.

Ulupi. naga princess; wife of Arjuna; mother of Iravan.

Upapandavas. sons of the Pandavas with Draupadi.

Uparichara. king; father of Satyawati and her twin brother Matsya.

Upasunda. asura; brother of Sunda; lover of the apsara

Tilottama.

Urvashi. apsara in Indra's heaven; wife of Pururavas.

Uttara. son of Virata and Sudeshna.

Uttarai. daughter of Virata and Sudeshna; wife of Abhimanyu (also spelled Uttaraa, Uttari).

Uttarayana. "North-Journey" which the sun begins after the winter solstice.

Vaikuntha. heavenly abode of Vishnu.

Vaishampayana. disciple of Vyasa; he recited the Mahabharata to Janamejaya.

Vali. king of the monkeys of Kishkindha; his story is told in the Ramayana.

Vallabha. identity used by Bhima while disguised as a cook in Virata's court.

Varaha. boar; the boar incarnation of Vishnu.

Varanavata. town in northern India where the Pandavas lived in the house of lacquer.

Vashishtha. rishi; owner of the wish-granting cow.

Vasuki. king of the nagas; he welcomed Bhima in the land of the nagas.

Vasus. eight gods representing the elements.

Vayu. wind-god; divine father of Bhima and of Hanuman.

Vedas. ancient holy scriptures.

Vichitravirya. son of Shantanu and Satyawati; elder brother of Chitrangada.

Vidura. son of Vyasa and Ambalika's servant; brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu.

Vikarna. one of the hundred sons of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra.

Virata. king of Matsya; husband of Sudeshna; father of Uttarai.

Vishnu. god of preservation; one of the supreme divinities with Brahma and Shiva.

Vishnu-astra. cosmic weapon imbued with the power of Vishnu; also called Vaishnavastra.

Vyasa. son of Satyavati and the rishi Parashara; composer of the Vedas.

Yadavas. descendants of Yadu; Krishna was a Yadava, as were Kritavarma and Satyaki.

Yadu. son of Yayati; ancestor of the Yadavas.

yakshas. spirits of mountains, woods, and lakes.

yakshinis. female yakshas.

Yama. god of death and of dharma; divine father of Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira. one of the five Pandava brothers; son of Kunti and Yama, the god of dharma.

Yugas. four ages of the world in this order: Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali .

Yuyutsu. son of Dhritarashtra and Sughada, the maid of Gandhari.

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